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Tearmoon Empire
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Tearmoon Empire

Chapter 10

CHIRP
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CHIRP
チュン

WHAT A MARVELOUS MORNING!

MNHHH!

STRETCH—!

MY, ISN'T THAT DRESS...?

AH, YES! I THOUGHT I'D GIVE IT A CLEANING WHEN I HAVE THE CHANCE.

OH?

GOOD MORNING, ANNE.

GOOD MORNING, MILADY!

EVERYONE WAS EXCITED TO SPEAK WITH ME.

I DANCED MY HEART OUT.

LAST NIGHT TRULY WAS FUN.

I HAD A PRINCE BY MY SIDE.

...

NOT AT ALL LIKE LAST TIME...

GOOD!

I'VE RATHER TAKEN A LIKING TO THAT DRESS.

DO TAKE CARE WITH IT.

YES, OF COURSE!

THE CAFE-TERIA

JUST A MOMENT, PRINCESS MIA!

I'LL BE RIGHT BACK AFTER I ARRANGE FOR YOUR BREAKFAST.

VERY GOOD! THANK YOU, ANNE.

WHAT COULD BE ON THE MENU TODAY, I WONDER?

HMM, HMM! ♪

OHO HO

WHEN DID ANNE HAVE TIME TO FIND HERSELF A SPECIAL SOMEONE?

SHE REALLY IS SUCH A RESOURCEFUL GIRL!

A MAN?

HMM?

TINA CLATTER

...HE?

...IS...

LEAN

スススイ

BUT JUST WHAT SORT OF MAN...

THAT'S PRINCE SION'S ATTENDANT, OF ALL PEOPLE!

WAIT!

ホラー

HORROR

?!

AND... HM?

THERE'S ANOTHER GIRL...?

THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE, MID-REVOLUTION

DIE...

...MIA!

EEEEEEK!

TIONA'S ATTENDANT TOO?!

WHY IN THE MOONS ARE YOU TALKING WITH THEM LIKE THEY'RE YOUR ***FRIENDS?!***

FRIENDLY

*WH-WH-WHAT ARE YOU **DOING**, ANNE?!*

HESITANT

I WAS GOING TO TELL YOU ABOUT IT LATER, BUT...

OH, ANNE?

WHO WERE YOU SPEAKING WITH JUST NOW?

AH...

Thank You!

AND I'M AFRAID THAT AS YOUR RIGHT HAND, I WOUND UP TAKING ACTION ON YOUR BEHALF.

BUT THEN THIS AND THAT...

THIS AND THAT...

?

LEEEAN

FROM MIA'S PERSPECTIVE...

THUD

BURBLE BURBLE BURBLE

EEEK! PRINCESS MIA!

Drop Dead!!!

HER RIGHT HAND HAD, HORROR OF HORRORS, ACTED ON ITS OWN TO SAVE HER MOST HATED OF FOES.

KILL HER!

KILL HER!

KILL HER!!!

ROAR

WAAAAA AAAAAA AAAAAH!

しゅ

SHOOSH

TURN

ばっ

...!

MILADY! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?!

THAT DREAM AGAIN.

SQUEEZE

IT'S BEEN SO LONG SINCE I LAST HAD IT.

I...

I FEEL... JUST FINE, THANK YOU.

YOU LOST CONSCIOUS-NESS OUT OF NOWHERE.

HOW DO YOU FEEL?

...

OH, THANK GOOD-NESS...

...!

FIRST, ANNE, I WOULD LIKE YOU TO CONTACT THE EMPIRE AND ARRANGE FOR THE FOUR INDIVIDUALS DIRECTLY INVOLVED WITH THE INCIDENT TO BE SENT HOME.

I WILL HANDLE THE REST MYSELF.

CONSIDERING EVERYTHING THAT ANNE TOLD ME, THOUGH...

...I'D BEST CHECK THAT DIARY AGAIN SOON.

NOW THEN...

DASH

U-UNDERSTOOD! RIGHT AWAY, MILADY!

...!

FLIP

KSHHH

IT'S PERFECTLY NORMAL FOR NOBLES TO PERSECUTE THE COMMON FOLK SOMETIMES, ISN'T IT?

WHAT'S SO DIFFERENT ABOUT CENTRAL NOBILITY PERSECUTING SOME BACKWATER NOBLE? IF ONE IS ACCEPTABLE, WHY NOT THE OTHER?

IT'S ALL COMING BACK TO ME NOW.

I DO BELIEVE I WAS SUSPECTED TO BE THE CULPRIT AT THE TIME...

I THOUGHT AS MUCH. TIONA'S IMPRISONMENT IS MENTIONED IN MY DIARY.

PRINCE SION AND TIONA'S OPINIONS OF ME WILL SUFFER AS WELL...

HAND-WAVING THIS INCIDENT WILL ASSUREDLY EARN ME RAFINA'S ANGER.

I UNDERSTAND NOW, THOUGH.

THAT SAID, SHE ***DID*** BELIEVE THAT MIA HAD A RESPONSIBILITY TO DENOUNCE THE NOBLES' TYRANNY AND WAS DEEPLY LET DOWN BY HER FAILURE TO DO SO.

IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE, RAFINA NEVER BELIEVED THAT MIA WAS DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE INCIDENT.

SPIN

AND SHE BELIEVES HERSELF FIT TO RULE?

I THINK NOT.

THE EVENTS OF THAT DAY WOULD FOREVER COLOR RAFINA'S IMPRESSION OF MIA AND ULTIMATELY RULE OUT ANY CHANCE OF THE TWO DEVELOPING A FRIENDSHIP.

WE CAN'T ACCEPT THIS, YOUR HIGHNESS!

WHY MUST OUR ATTENDANTS BE SENT AWAY?!

BAM

...

PLEASE, AT LEAST EXPLAIN IT TO US!

ALL FOUR CULPRITS CAME FROM NOBLE HOUSEHOLDS.

THOUGH NONE OF THEM WERE HEIRS TO THEIR REALMS, THEY ***HAD*** BEEN RAISED AS CENTRAL NOBILITY AND HAD DEVELOPED A SENSE OF PRIDE TO MATCH.

SEEING A BACKWATER NOBLE INVITED TO THE PARTY WHILE THEY WERE LEFT BY THE WAYSIDE HAD SURELY BRUISED THEIR EGOS.

BEFORE I DO, A QUESTION.

THE PERPETRATORS SERVED THE FOUR OF YOU. WERE YOU AT ALL INVOLVED IN THEIR PLOT?

NO...

THEY DIDN'T TELL US ANYTHING.

...BUT UNLIKE THEIR ATTENDANTS, THESE FOUR LACK A MOTIVE. THE EVIDENCE AGAINST THEM IS CIRCUMSTANTIAL AT BEST.

HMM

THIS IS TRICKY.

I KNOW THAT I MUST MAKE A DEFINITIVE JUDGMENT...

CENTRAL NOBLES HAVE ALL BUT FREE REIN TO TERRORIZE THOSE BENEATH THEM, COMMONER AND LESSER NOBILITY ALIKE.

IN THE EMPIRE, THAT'S SIMPLY HOW IT IS DONE. THE PRACTICE IS DEEP-SEATED IN OUR SYSTEM OF VALUES.

...

ALL THIS BECAUSE A BACKWATER NOBLE'S DAUGHTER WAS LOCKED UP FOR AN EVENING?

WHY GO SO FAR, THOUGH?

WHO CAN SAY HOW MUCH OF THE PEOPLE'S HATRED THAT HAS EARNED US?

I SEE.

PERHAPS YOU ARE RIGHT.

THERE MAY WELL BE MERIT TO YOUR CLAIMS.

TO SOW THE SEEDS OF HATRED IS TO REAP THEIR FRUITS...

...BUT IF I TOLD THEM THAT, IT WOULD GO RIGHT OVER THEIR HEADS.

!!!

AH!

YOU OUGHT TO CONSIDER WHO HOLDS AUTHORITY OVER THIS ACADEMY.

IF WE WERE IN THE EMPIRE...

...THAT IS.

IF SHE WERE TO JUDGE THEM BASED ON HER OWN VALUES—THE EMPIRE'S VALUES—THEY WOULD HOLD THAT JUDGMENT AGAINST HER.

MIA HAD A PLAN.

I TAKE IT YOU UNDERSTAND NOW.

MISS RAFINA IS AS NOBLE AND HIGH-MINDED AS THEY COME.

SO IF SHE WANTED TO DODGE THEIR RESENTMENT...

I'LL SHOVE ALL THE RESPON-SIBILITY OFF ONTO RAFINA!

THE PERFECT PLAN!

BAM!

DO YOU BELIEVE SHE WOULD CONDONE SUCH THUGGERY TOWARD ONE OF HER ACADEMY'S PRECIOUS STUDENTS?

I AM...LESS THAN FOND OF YOUR MINDSET.

...!

AND I MUST ADMIT...

THE VICTIMS, THE PERPETRATORS...

...AND THE WITNESSES ALIKE.

ANYONE CAN BE HURT BY DERISIVE WORDS. ANYONE CAN BE WOUNDED BY VIOLENCE AND ABUSE.

GANGING UP ON THE WEAK, BULLYING THEM...

THERE IS NOTHING NOBLE ABOUT SUCH BEHAVIOR!

I'M THROUGH WITH IT. ALL OF IT.

...!

WERE I TO JUDGE YOU BY MISS RAFINA'S STANDARDS, I WOULD BE FORCED TO HAVE YOU TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS INCIDENT AND SURRENDER YOUR STUDENT STATUS.

...!

PLEASE, NOT THAT!

WHAT WILL I TELL MY FAMILY?! I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO SHOW MY FACE IN PUBLIC AGAIN!

WE CAN'T WASTE OUR ONE CHANCE TO STUDY AT SAINT-NOEL!

AH

I WOULD FIND SUCH TREATMENT OVERLY CRUEL.

AS SUCH...

HOWEVER!

...ALLOW ME TO HANDLE THIS.

I WILL ASK A PERSONAL FAVOR OF MISS RAFINA TO FORGIVE YOU FOR YOUR ACTIONS.

I TRUST YOU FIND THIS AGREEABLE?

SMILE

PRINCESS MIA...

SHE'D DO THAT FOR US? SUCH BENEVOLENCE!

AND SO MIA PLACED A QUARTET OF NOBLES FIRMLY IN HER DEBT.

PHEW...

I JUST HOPE THINGS WILL SETTLE DOWN NOW SO EVERYONE CAN MOVE ON.

THANK YOU SO MUCH!

LUNCH-TIME

MAY I HAVE A MOMENT?

STIFF

STIFF

UMM! MISS RAFINA?

LEAN

JUMP

ビク

HOW MAY I HELP YOU?

OH, MIA!

Talking with you isn't worth my time!

SHWICK

J-JUST BECAUSE SHE'S SMILING DOESN'T MEAN I CAN REST EASY!

HOW MANY TIMES HAS SHE SMILED WHILE HER WORDS CUT ME TO THE QUICK?!

UMM...

THERE'S SOMETHING I'D LIKE TO DISCUSS WITH YOU...

OH, IS THERE?

IN THAT CASE...

Y-YES, OF COURSE!

SMILE

SMILE

WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN ME IN MY ROOM? I WAS JUST ABOUT TO HAVE LUNCH.

TH-THE TWO OF US, ALONE TOGETHER...?

?

TMP

GOSH, THAT'S RIGHT!

?

WHAT GIFTS?

THOSE WOULD BE THE GIFTS ANNE ARRANGED THE DAY BEFORE.

GENTLE

THANK YOU FOR YOUR GIFTS!

THE STAFF LOVED THEM VERY MUCH.

W-WELL, AT ANY RATE, MISS RAFINA SEEMS TO BE IN A GOOD MOOD.

SMIRK

I MIGHT JUST SURVIVE THIS!

MISS RAFINA...

BOW

!

I'M TERRIBLY SORRY FOR WHAT HAPPENED LAST NIGHT.

NONE OF WHAT HAPPENED WAS YOUR DOING, WAS IT?

YOU DON'T HAVE TO APOLOGIZE, PRINCESS MIA.

COME ON, LOOK AS EARNEST AS POSSIBLE!

THE SLIGHTEST SLIP HERE COULD MEAN THE GUILLOTINE!

NO, IT WASN'T MY DOING! I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IT WAS HAPPENING!!!

NO...

...BUT AS TEARMOON'S PRINCESS, I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ACTIONS OF ITS NOBLES!

MIA'S HEART SCREAMS FOR JUSTICE.

UGH!

HOWEVER, IT'S UNCLEAR WHETHER THE STUDENTS THEY SERVED WERE INVOLVED, SO I'VE INSTRUCTED THEM TO BE ON THEIR BEST BEHAVIOR.

TWITCH

...

...

I'VE HAD THE FOUR ATTENDANTS DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE SENT BACK TO THE EMPIRE.

WELL THEN, HOW DO YOU INTEND TO DISCIPLINE THEM?

LOOM

THAT SEEMS...

...RATHER LENIENT, WOULDN'T YOU SAY?

EEEK!

TERROR

I HAVE TO THINK OF SOMETHING... SOMETHING THAT COULD CONVINCE HER...

I SHOULDN'T HAVE LET THE MASTERS OFF SO EASILY AFTER ALL!

MERCIFUL MOONS!

GRRR

OH NO OH NO OH NO OH NO

PRINCESS MIA.

YOU ARE A REMARKABLY MERCIFUL INDIVIDUAL.

SHIVER SHIVER

CRUMBLE CRUMBLE

NOPE. I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING AT ALL.

FROM ZERO TO RESIGNATION IN NO TIME FLAT.

AMBERMOON TOMATO SOUP...

AS VASSALS OF THE IMPERIAL FAMILY, IT IS OUR SOLEMN DUTY TO SAFEGUARD YOUR HIGHNESS'S HEALTH.

...WHEN THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT TO EAT AT ALL.

AH

FOR THE LONGEST TIME, I DETESTED AMBERMOON TOMATOES AND REFUSED TO EAT THEM. I ONLY REALIZED HOW SINFUL THAT WASTE WAS...

TO THINK OF ALL THE TROUBLE HE WENT THROUGH TO COOK FOR ME, ONLY FOR ME TO SPURN HIS EFFORTS.

WHAT A FOOL I WAS...

...

PRINCESS MIA.

I NEED TO FACE REALITY!

WAIT! THIS IS NO TIME TO BE GETTING NOSTALGIC!

YOU MEAN TO SAY THAT PEOPLE DO BAD THINGS...

...BECAUSE THEY'RE UNAWARE THEY'RE WRONG?

IS THAT IT?

...UH?

AS SUCH, WE CAN FOCUS ON PROMOTING REFLECTION IN THE OFFENDERS, IN THE HOPE THAT THEY LEARN AND MATURE.

YES, THAT MAY WELL BE THE COURSE OF ACTION MOST BEFITTING A PLACE OF LEARNING.

PUNISHMENT SERVES TWO PURPOSES.

THE FIRST IS TO PROVIDE SOLACE FOR THE VICTIM.

THE SECOND, TO ENCOURAGE REFLECTION IN THE OFFENDER.

THANKS TO ANNE'S TIMELY INTERVENTION, LITTLE HARM WAS DONE IN THIS CASE.

THE VICTIM'S REDRESS, AS SUCH, IS A SIMPLE MATTER.

SMILE

YOU SENT ANNE, YOUR MOST TRUSTED AIDE, BECAUSE YOU SAW THROUGH ALL OF THIS IN ADVANCE, DIDN'T YOU?

I UNDERSTAND NOW.

EXCUSE: ENTHUSIAS-TICALLY SEIZED.

CONFIDENCE

YES! ABSOLUTELY!

STEP

MIA...

カリ CLATTER

I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT SHE'S TALKING ABOUT, BUT IF IT GETS ME OUT OF THIS PREDICAMENT, I'LL TAKE IT!

I SEE NOW WHY THEY CALL YOU THE GREAT SAGE OF THE EMPIRE.

YOU POSSESS A SENSE OF MERCY THAT I LACK—THE COMPASSION TO URGE THE WICKED TO SEEK REDEMPTION.

FIDGET

AND, ALSO...

WELL...

I-I'M HONORED, TRULY...

MIA?

UMM...

I CAN'T SAY I'M COMFORT-ABLE WITH **THIS** MUCH PRAISE.

TH-THERE'S STILL MORE?

WOULD...

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE MY FRIEND?

HUH?

AND SO MIA GAINED A NEW FRIEND: THE DAUGHTER OF THE DUKE OF BELLUGA, RAFINA.

YOU'VE DONE A TRULY, ***TRULY*** MARVELOUS JOB!

ANNE!

I WAS JUST TRYING TO MAKE SURE I DIDN'T EMBARRASS YOU...

BUT I BARELY DID ANYTHING AT ALL!

MOVED

MILADY...

IF I HADN'T, I'M SURE THINGS WOULD HAVE TURNED OUT THE SAME WAY AS LAST TIME...

EMBARRASS ME? PERISH THE THOUGHT! BRINGING YOU HERE WAS THE BEST DECISION I'VE EVER MADE!

THANK YOU, ANNE.

REWARD ME?! YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THAT, MILADY!

OH, BUT I DO! I SIMPLY WON'T FEEL RIGHT OTHERWISE!

STAND

OH, OF COURSE!

I MUST FIND A WAY TO REWARD YOU!

LET US BE OFF! TO THE CITY!

!!!

!!!

!!!

DA-DAAN!

A-ARE YOU GOING TO BUY SOMETHING...?

OHO HO HO!

ISN'T IT OBVIOUS? THERE'S ONLY ONE THING THAT COULD SERVE AS AN ADEQUATE REWARD FOR YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS!

IN SHORT—

SWEETS!

Milady, wait for me!

We'll do a grand tour of all the sweets shops around!

SLAM

HER QUEST TO DODGE THE GUILLOTINE, HOWEVER, WAS STILL FAR FROM OVER.

AND SO MIA CIRCUMVENTED A FATEFUL TURNING POINT ON THE ROAD TO REVOLUTION.

Tearmoon Empire

CHATTER

CHATTER

A FEW DAYS AFTER THE DANCE...

TMP.

HEH.

TODAY'S THE DAY OUR LESSONS FINALLY BEGIN.

Chapter 11

I HOPE I'M NOT LEFT BEHIND...

I'VE HEARD THE LESSONS AT SAINT-NOEL ARE ALL ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF SCHOLARSHIP!

OH, I'M SO WORRIED...

NOT TO MENTION THE YEARS I SPENT PUTTING IT ALL INTO PRACTICE!

IF THERE'S ANYTHING YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, I'D BE HAPPY TO EXPLAIN IT TO YOU.

I'VE ALREADY LEARNED EVERYTHING THEY'LL BE TEACHING US!

NO NEED TO WORRY!

CLATTER

THE IMPERIAL FAMILY IS ALWAYS A STEP AHEAD OF THE REST OF US!

はあはあはあ HAAHAA

OH, WOW!

SHE'S SO *CONFIDENT!*

OHO HO HO! THIS WILL BE A WALK IN THE PARK!

ドヤァ DOYAAA

YOU'RE AMAZING, PRINCESS MIA!

AN ATTITUDE MIA WOULD SOON REGRET.

AS YOU CAN SEE, BY APPLYING THE FORMULA LIKE SO...

HM?

HMM?

WE'RE QUICKLY LED TO THIS CONCLUSION...

MIA HAD FORGOTTEN ONE KEY DETAIL.

SHE HAD NEVER BEEN A GOOD STUDENT TO BEGIN WITH.

HOW VERY STRANGE.

I DON'T REMEMBER ANY OF THIS AT ALL.

Schmithmetic

Arithmetic

BACK IN THE EMPIRE, I MADE SURE TO STUDY UP ON EVERYTHING THAT COULD HELP ME AVOID THE GUILLOTINE...

...BUT SINCE WHEN WAS **MATH** THIS TERRIBLY CHALLENGING?

I'LL ASK PRINCESS MIA ABOUT THIS...

I'LL ASK PRINCESS MIA ABOUT THIS...

GLANCE

I CAN'T SAY I DON'T KNOW HOW TO ANSWER THEIR QUESTIONS AFTER ALL THAT TALK! I COULDN'T BEAR THE HUMILIATION!

M-M-M—

HORRIFIED

ME AND MY BIG MOUTH!

DING-DONG

A PORTRAIT OF MIA INSTANTLY REGRETTING HER DECISIONS.

TOO MUCH

Ah!

PRINCESS MIA!

DO YOU—

ALL RIGHT, THAT'S ALL FOR TODAY...

CLAT

TER

WHAM!

ANNE!

AAANNE!

HUH...?

JUMP

ANNE!

MILADY!

WHAT'S WRONG?

Why so flus-tered...?

STARTING TOMORROW, I WANT YOU TO COME WITH ME TO MATH CLASS.

WHAT?

SAINT-NOEL ALLOWS ATTENDANTS TO ACCOMPANY THEIR MASTERS TO LESSONS!

PLENTY OF STUDENTS BRING ACADEMICALLY GIFTED ATTENDANTS TO HELP WITH THEIR STUDIES.

Y-YES, THAT'S TRUE...

BUT I'VE NEVER HAD A GIFT FOR ACADEMICS.

WILL I REALLY BE OF ANY USE?

WHAT?!

I COULD NEVER, MILADY!

YOU COULD CLEAN OUR ROOM ONLY ONCE EVERY TWO DAYS! I'LL EVEN HELP YOU!

OH, OF COURSE...

ON DAYS YOU COME TO CLASS, FEEL FREE TO CUT DOWN THE REST OF YOUR WORKLOAD ACCORDINGLY.

THAT WON'T DO. YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TIME TO HELP ME REVIEW THE LESSON AFTERWARD!

SHAKE

EVEN IF I DO GO TO CLASS, I'LL FINISH ALL OF MY WORK AS WELL!

I WANT YOU TO LEARN ALL THE SUBJECTS I'M BAD AT SO YOU CAN TUTOR ME LATER!

I-I'VE SAID TOO MUCH!

ANNE RESPECTS ME! IMAGINE IF I TOLD HER THE TRUTH!

HUH?

Review the lesson?

AH...

STIF-FEN

EVEN MIA HAS A SENSE OF PRIDE.

I COULDN'T! ABSOLUTELY NOT!

SAINT-NOEL'S TEACHINGS ARE THE FINEST AROUND!

IF I APPLY MYSELF HERE, THE THINGS I LEARN COULD BE USEFUL IN ALL SORTS OF WAYS...

THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO TELL ME, ISN'T IT, MILADY?!

はわぁ！

HAWE

M-MILADY...

YOU WERE THINKING ABOUT ME...?

I...

DESPERATE EXCUSE!

I BELIEVE KNOWING ARITHMETIC WILL BE USEFUL FOR YOU IN THE FUTURE.

...!

Y-YES, LOVELY...

EEP

I SWEAR I'LL PAY YOU BACK SOMEHOW! I WON'T LET YOU DOWN!

THANK YOU SO, SO MUCH, MILADY!

MIA THE CHICKEN-HEARTED CAVES, REVEALING THE TRUTH TO ASSUAGE HER GUILT...

B-BUT REALLY, DON'T THINK ANYTHING OF IT.

I'VE BEEN HAVING SOME TROUBLE KEEPING UP, AND REALLY, I JUST WANT YOU THERE TO GIVE ME SOME HELP.

...BUT HER EVER-LOYAL MAID TAKES NO NOTICE OF HER MISTRESS'S COWARDICE!

THAT'S JUST AN EXCUSE, ISN'T IT? YOU SIMPLY DON'T WANT ME TO FEEL GUILTY ABOUT IMPOSING UPON YOU!

AH!

MILADY...

NORMALLY IT WOULD BE UNTHINKABLE FOR A COMMONER LIKE ME TO LEARN AT SAINT-NOEL, AND NOT ONLY AM I HERE FOR FREE, I'M EVEN GETTING PAID!

CLENCH

SHE'S TELLING ME THAT I NEED TO PREPARE MYSELF FOR THAT POSSIBILITY! TO GAIN THE KNOWLEDGE I'LL NEED TO GET BY ON MY OWN!

SHE IS NOT.

I WANT TO STAY BY MILADY MIA'S SIDE—TO BE WITH HER, WHEREVER SHE GOES.

BUT THAT MAY NOT LAST... THERE MAY COME A DAY I HAVE TO STEP DOWN AS HER MAID-IN-WAITING.

A-ANNE?

WAS THAT EXCUSE A STEP TOO FAR AFTER ALL?

WOULD IT BE ARROGANT OF ME TO INTERPRET IT THAT WAY?

MAYBE SHE'S TELLING ME TO OBTAIN THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS I'LL NEED TO SERVE AS HER RIGHT HAND?

OR MAYBE...

...SHE REALLY **IS** SERIOUS ABOUT MAKING ME HER CONFIDANTE?

HMPH!

MILADY...

I'LL DO MY ABSOLUTE BEST!

AND SO MIA GAINED A (POTENTIALLY) POWERFUL ALLY TO AID HER IN HER STUDIES.

MARVELOUS! PLEASE DO, ANNE.

OH, GOOD! EVERYTHING SEEMS FINE AFTER ALL!

SAINT-NOEL ACADEMY IS HOME TO A MYRIAD OF CLUBS.

SOME FOCUS ON ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND INQUIRY.

OTHERS ON SWORDS- OR SPEARMANSHIP AND THE MARTIAL ARTS.

SOME EVEN DEVOTE THEMSELVES TO HOBBIES AND PASTIMES, LIKE THE EVER-POPULAR TEA PARTY CLUB.

ALL SORTS OF ACTIVITIES ARE AVAILABLE TO SATISFY A STUDENT BODY USED TO LIVING IN LUXURY.

ONE OF THOSE CLUBS CAUGHT MIA'S INTEREST.

THAT BEING...

FOUND IT.

PARDON ME!

...THE HORSEMAN-SHIP CLUB.

キョ
GLANCE

キョ
GLANCE

THEY HAVE ENOUGH HORSES TO FIELD AN ENTIRE SQUAD OF OUR IMPERIAL GUARD.

VERY IMPRESSIVE! AS EXPECTED OF SAINT-NOEL.

HEY, MISS!

WHAT'RE YOU DOING AROUND HERE?

ヒ
WHISPER

ISN'T THAT THE PRINCESS OF TEARMOON?

MOST GIRLS CAN'T STAND THE HORSES' SMELL AND GIVE THIS PLACE A WIDE BERTH.

WHAT COULD BE IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO MAKE THE IMPERIAL PRINCESS OF ALL PEOPLE COME HERE?

WHISPER
ヒ!!

GET LOST OR SOMETHING?

OH...?

IF I RECALL COR-RECTLY...

...AREN'T YOU THE MAN WHO WAS WALKING A HORSE ON THE DAY OF THE PARTY?

!

OH! YOU'RE THE MISS FROM THAT TIME!

KA CHOO!

HA HA!

AND I AM MIA LUNA TEARMOON.

THE NAME'S LIN MALONG.

SORRY ABOUT THAT.

I'M A SECOND-YEAR SENIOR, AND LEADER OF THE HORSEMANSHIP CLUB.

THE EQUESTRIAN KINGDOM:

A NATION MADE UP OF 12 CLANS, EACH RENOWNED FOR THEIR HORSEMANSHIP.

JUDGING BY YOUR NAME, I PRESUME YOU'RE FROM THE EQUESTRIAN KINGDOM?

OH, YOU CAN TELL? GOTTA SAY, IT'S AN HONOR THAT THE TEARMOON PRINCESS KNOWS ABOUT US.

SITUATED TO THE EAST OF BELLUGA, IN A VAST GRASSLAND THAT OCCUPIES THE CONTINENT'S CENTRAL REGIONS, ITS PEOPLE LIVE IN HARMONY WITH THEIR HORSES.

MALONG IS THE DESCENDENT OF ONE OF THE 12 CLANS' CHIEFS, AND IS RENOWNED FOR HIS SKILL AS A WARRIOR.

SHOULD PUTTING DOWN THE REVOLUTION BY FORCE PROVE NECESSARY, FORGING A CONNECTION WITH HIM COULD PROVE VITAL TO MIA'S FUTURE.

SERIOUS

DON'T TELL ME...

...YOU WANT THAT HORSE ***DEAD***, OR SOMETHING?

SO?

WHAT'RE YOU HERE FOR?

STILL GOT SOME HARD FEELINGS ABOUT THE OTHER DAY?

SHE CAN COMPLAIN ALL SHE LIKES, BUT IF SHE WANTS US TO HARM THE HORSES, SHE'D BETTER BE READY FOR A FIGHT...

IT WOULDN'T BE THE FIRST TIME SOME SCHOOLGIRL STORMED IN SCREAMING FOR A HORSE TO BE PUT DOWN AFTER IT SLIGHTED HER.

!

ピクッ

DEAD?

WHYEVER WOULD I WANT THAT?

ピクピク

SMILE

WHY WOULD I HAVE A HORSE KILLED OVER SOMETHING SO TRIFLING?

IT'S PLAIN TO SEE THAT A HORSE IS MORE VALUABLE THAN A DRESS, IN ANY CASE!

I MEAN... SHE RUINED YOUR DRESS, DIDN'T SHE?

OH, THAT...

YES, IT'S PLAIN AS DAY...

TWITCH

ピク

...

OH...?

WHEN THE REVOLUTION CAME KNOCKING, MIA ATTEMPTED TO ESCAPE IN A HORSE-DRAWN CARRIAGE.

SHE WAS CAUGHT IMMEDIATELY. NOT EVEN THE FINEST HORSE COULD EVADE PURSUIT FOREVER WHILE WEIGHED DOWN BY A BURDEN THAT HEAVY.

AFTER ALL, A **DRESS** COULDN'T HELP ME ESCAPE FROM THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMY!

SMILE

ACTUALLY, I SIMPLY CAME TO TAKE A LOOK AT YOUR CLUB TODAY.

TO TAKE A LOOK, HUH...?

WELL, FEEL FREE TO LOOK ALL YOU WANT.

IF I DO, WILL I BE ABLE TO LEARN TO RIDE A HORSE?

ARE YOU THINKING OF JOINING, THOUGH?

AND TO DO THAT, I MUST LEARN TO RIDE A HORSE!

IDEALLY, I'LL PREVENT THE REVOLUTION ALTOGETHER...

*...BUT IF IT **DOES** OCCUR, I'LL NEED TO MAKE A SWIFT ESCAPE TO A NEIGHBORING KINGDOM!*

CLOP CLOP CLOP CLOP CLOP CLOP CLOP CLOP CLOP

MIA COULD EASILY FORGIVE A HEADFUL OF HORSE SNOT IF IT MEANT SECURING A MEANS OF ESCAPING THE GUILLOTINE!

HORSEMANSHIP IS A PRACTICAL SKILL, AND ONE SUITED FOR WAR, AT THAT.

WHY WOULD THE IMPERIAL PRINCESS BE INTERESTED IN RIDING?

WELL, SURE...

...BUT WHY DO YOU ***WANT*** TO LEARN TO RIDE ONE?

BECAUSE A HORSE...

...COULD TAKE ME FAR AWAY.

AS FAR AS I COULD EVER WANT TO GO.

FAR ENOUGH THAT THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMY COULD NEVER FOLLOW, IDEALLY!

AH

ooo!

Never forget, Malong.

Your horse is your partner.

They elevate you.

They grant you freedom, and take you wherever you wish to go.

We of the Equestrian Kingdom live and die with our horses by our side.

YOU WOULD NEVER HEAR THAT SORT OF SENTIMENT FROM ONE WHO VIEWS THEM AS SIMPLE TOOLS OF WAR OR PETS TO PAMPER.

THE WAY SHE SPEAKS OF HORSES...

THERE'S A LOT MORE TO THIS PRINCESS THAN MEETS THE EYE!

MIA'S WORDS STRUCK A CHORD WITH MALONG.

MY...

WAIT A MOMENT...

IS THAT YOU, PRINCESS MIA?

PRINCE ABEL!

I'M *TECHNICALLY* A PRINCE OF REMNO, AFTER ALL.

STRETCH

I THOUGHT I SHOULD AT LEAST TRY TO GET MY HORSE- AND SWORDSMANSHIP BRUSHED UP.

WHAT A COINCIDENCE! HAVE YOU JOINED THE HORSEMAN-SHIP CLUB, PERCHANCE?

HM?

OH, YES, I HAVE.

IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE, ABEL WAS A MEMBER OF THE CARD GAME CLUB...

...WHICH WAS A COLLECTIVE OF GOOD-FOR-NOTHINGS WHO SPENT ALL DAY GAMBLING.

MIA'S IMPRESSION OF ABEL AT THE TIME WAS THAT OF A LISTLESS BOY WITH A FLIPPANT SMILE.

IS THAT SO?

THAT'S CERTAINLY A SURPRISE.

AH, UMM...

I'M INTERESTED IN HORSE-MANSHIP, SO I CAME TO LOOK AROUND.

AND WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE?

I THOUGHT FOR SURE HE'D BE LOAFING AROUND WITH HIS FELLOW DEGENERATES THIS TIME AS WELL...

キラ SPARKLE

キラ SPARKLE

キラ SPARKLE

HMM

BUT NOW HE'S PRACTICALLY BRIMMING WITH VITALITY!

I WONDER WHY?

YOU? HORSEMAN-SHIP?

THAT'S CERTAINLY A SURPRISE...

MALONG!

YES, I WAS FORTUNATE ENOUGH TO BE HER PARTNER FOR THE RECENT PARTY.

HEY, ABEL!

ARE YOU A FRIEND OF THE MISS, HERE?

THE MISS CAME TO HAVE A LOOK AT OUR CLUB.

OH?

GOOD TIMING, THEN.

SO WHY DON'T YOU TAKE HER FOR A RIDE?

PAT

...WHAT?

WELL, YES, BUT...

IF SHE'S TAKEN AN INTEREST IN THE HORSES, WE CAN'T EXACTLY LET HER LEAVE EMPTY-HANDED, CAN WE?

PUMP

GLANCE

OH, MY...

OH, MY...

COULD IT BE? IS PRINCE ABEL **EMBARRASSED?**

TEE-HEE!

MIA SHIFTS INTO PATRONIZING MODE!

OHO HO HO, ISN'T HE JUST THE SWEETEST THING!

—FANCY-SHMANCY-ROMANCY

NO WONDER POOR LITTLE PRINCE ABEL WOULD FEEL NERVOUS ABOUT IT!

RIDING A HORSE IN TANDEM IS RATHER INTIMATE, I SUPPOSE!

ぴよ

KEEP

！

OH, PRINCE ABEL?

WON'T YOU BE SO KIND AS TO BE MY ESCORT?

A GROWN WOMAN WITH ZERO ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE.

*MEANWHILE **I'VE** LIVED TO THE AGE OF TWENTY ONCE BEFORE! I'M A GROWN WOMAN!*

READING THE INTENT OF AN ADOLESCENT BOY LIKE HIM IS CHILD'S PLAY!

DON'T WORRY— AS THE OLDER AND MORE MATURE OF US, I'LL BE SURE TO TAKE THE LEAD!

OH, MARVELOUS! THANK YOU!

I SO ENJOYED GETTING TO KNOW YOU AT THE PARTY.

UH, WELL...

IF YOU INSIST, I SUPPOSE...

MIA'S ATTITUDE OF HAUGHTY WORLDLINESS WOULD LAST A MATTER OF SECONDS.

H—

HIGH! HIGH!

H-H—

EEEK!

FAR TOO HIGH!

ALL RIGHT. SHALL WE, PRINCESS MIA?

TREMBLE

LOOKING GOOD, YOU TWO!

MAKE SURE TO HOLD ON TIGH—

!

JUMP

GAH!

SQUEEZE

Y-YOU DON'T HAVE TO HOLD ON *THAT* TIGHT!

わ！ BLUぁぁぁぁ

P-PRINCESS MIA?!

SQUEEZE

I-I-I'M TOTALLY FINE!

COMPLETELY IN CONTROL!

I—

I-I—

I KNOW!

WELL, I'M SURE THEY'LL BE JUST FINE!

HA HA HA

A SIGN OF IMMINENT DISASTER.

COME TO THINK OF IT, ISN'T IT CUSTOM TO HAVE THE LESS EXPERIENCED RIDER SIT IN FRONT AROUND THESE PARTS?

GUESS I WENT AND TOLD THEM TO SADDLE UP THE WAY COUPLES DO BACK HOME.

AH...

COME ON, PRINCESS MIA!

OPEN YOUR EYES AND LOOK AROUND!

THE VIEW FROM UP ON A HORSE IS QUITE SOMETHING, YOU KNOW?

I-I SUPPOSE I SHALL...

PEEK

HERE GOES...

WHOOSH

MY...

REST

WHY, I'M EVEN STARTING TO FEEL A LITTLE SLEEPY...

YES.

I FEEL MOST COMFORT-ABLE...

NOT SO SCARY, IS IT?

AH...

HE WAS RIGHT AFTER ALL...

BLUSH

WH-WHAT THE?!

P-PRINCESS MIA, WHAT'RE YOU—

MY, SO SHE IS!

AH! L-LOOK OVER THERE!

YOUR ATTENDANT'S HERE!

!!!

!? WAVE

AAANNE!

TOPPLE

WAIT, NO! DON'T LET GO!

EH?

EEEEK!

WHAT!!

MNH...

IT DIDN'T HURT...?

WHA...?

HUH?

OW, OW, OW...

ARE YOU OKAY, PRINCESS MIA?

SHOCK

!!!

P-PRINCE ABEL?!

WHAT JUST...?

DID HE...

HAH

...SAVE ME...?

GAAAH

WHA?! BUT— HUH?!

?

DANCING WITH HIM WAS BARELY ANY DIFFERENT!

A HUG FROM PRINCE ABEL IS HARDLY WORTH GETTING ALL WORKED UP OVER!

WH—

WH—

WHAT IN THE MOONS AM I GETTING SO FLUSTERED FOR?!

BMP

BMP

BMP

BMP

BMP

AND BESIDES, PRINCE ABEL IS JUST A CHILD!

BLUSH

HE'S EIGHT YEARS YOUNGER THAN ME!

DID YOU HURT YOURSELF?

IS EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT, PRINCESS MIA?

FWSH

N-NO! DON'T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT!

O-OH, RIGHT!

JUMP

I-I'M PERFECTLY FINE, YES!

AS FINE AS COULD BE, SO IF YOU WOULDN'T MIND...

...C-COULD YOU LET ME GO, PLEASE?

SCOOCH

OF COURSE!

MY APOLOGIES...

GLOOM

OH, YES. OF COURSE...

AH, PLEASE DON'T GET THE WRONG IDEA, PRINCE ABEL!

I DON'T MIND BEING HELD BY YOU, OR ANYTHING OF THE SORT!

I KNOW.

STING ズキン

...!

AH! THAT'S RIGHT!

SCOOT SCOOT SCOOT

RESTLESS

WHY IS IT THAT I FEEL SO UNEASY? NO, I KNOW...

IT'S BECAUSE IF HE LEARNS TO HATE ME HERE, PRINCE ABEL WON'T SEND ME REINFORCEMENTS! THAT MUST BE IT.

GRIL

ABEL

PRINCE ABEL!

THANK YOU EVER SO MUCH FOR SAVING ME!

!!!

TOO CLOSE!!

HOW TERRIBLY CLEVER I AM!

AH, U-UMM...

I-I UNDERSTAND...

I JUST HAVE TO MAKE HIM EXPERIENCE THAT FOR HIMSELF!

WHEN SOMEBODY GETS TOO CLOSE, THE NATURAL IMPULSE IS TO BACK AWAY!

COULD YOU MAYBE NOT GET QUITE SO CLOSE?

I GET IT ALREADY, SO, UMM... A LITTLE SPACE?

SEE? YOU LOOKED AWAY TOO, DIDN'T YOU?

W-WELL, I...

WOULD YOU CARE TO EXPLAIN WHY?

GRIN

YES. I'M A PERSON OF DELICATE SENSIBILITIES, AND I GET NERVOUS WHEN OTHER PEOPLE GET TOO CLOSE TO ME.

THAT'S IT! THAT'S **ALL** THERE IS TO IT!

HOW YOU FEEL NOW IS ***PRECISELY*** HOW I FELT A MOMENT AGO, PRINCE ABEL.

WHA—

W-WELL, I'M PRETTY SURE...

...I FEEL IT A LOT STRONGER THAN YOU DID.

MY! IS THAT A SORE LOSER I HEAR?

HEE HEE

DOES HE MEAN TO SAY HE'S MORE DELICATE THAN I AM?

MIA HAD YET TO NOTICE TWO THINGS.

FIRST, THAT WHILE *SHE* MEANT SHE WAS NERVOUS SIMPLY BECAUSE SOMEONE HAD GOTTEN TOO CLOSE TO HER...

...ABEL MEANT HE WAS NERVOUS BECAUSE HE'D BEEN APPROACHED BY THE GIRL HE FANCIED.

AND SECOND, THAT HER TRUE FEELINGS WERE RATHER CLOSER TO HIS THAN SHE WOULD CARE TO ADMIT.

Chapter 12

APROPOS OF NOTHING, MIA WAS FAR FROM FRIENDLESS.

SQUEAL SQUEAL

BEFITTING HER ROYAL STATUS, SHE WAS CONSTANTLY SURROUNDED BY AN ENTOURAGE OF OTHER GIRLS.

PRINCESS MIA!

UGH...

FLIP

MANY FACTIONS AND CLIQUES EXISTED IN HER CLASS, WITH MIA'S OWN BEING THE LARGEST. AND YET...

BREAK TIME AGAIN...

...THERE WERE STILL SOME STUDENTS WHO DIDN'T FIT IN ANYWHERE. IN SHORT: LONERS.

CHLOE FORKROAD

HER PARENTS SECURED CHLOE'S ADMISSION TO SAINT-NOEL BY WAY OF A HEFTY DONATION.

HOWEVER, AS A NEWCOMER WHOSE PLACE HAD BEEN PURCHASED, CHLOE STUCK OUT LIKE A SORE THUMB AMID HER NOBLE PEERS.

DAUGHTER OF MARCO FORKROAD, THE CURRENT HEAD OF FORKROAD & CO...

...A BUSINESS WHICH GREW CONSIDERABLY UNDER HIS LEADERSHIP.

ALONE...

THAT, PLUS HER NATURAL SHYNESS, RESULTED IN CHLOE'S SCHOOL LIFE BEING A LONELY ONE INDEED.

SHOULD I WORK UP THE COURAGE TO TALK TO SOMEONE?

WHAT AM I GOING TO DO TOMORROW?

GLANCE...

キャッ CHATTER

キャッ CHATTER

THIS IS THE LAST BOOK I HAVEN'T READ.

AND I BROUGHT SO MANY TOO...

NOT POSSIBLE. EVER.

NO WAY.

EXCUSE ME?

UGH...

OVERWHELMED

I WISH I COULD JUST DISAPPEAR...

EXCUSE ME! DO YOU HAVE A MOMENT?

HUH...?

WHAT ARE YOU READING?

OH! I...

IT'S, UMM...

STARE...

THE IMPERIAL PRINCESS?

WHY IS SHE TALKING TO ME?

AH!

UMM...

JOLT

HUH?

I-IT...

...TALKS ABOUT HOW THEY GET THEIR WATER...

...AND STUFF LIKE THAT...

...AND, UMM...

IT'S AN ILLUS-TRATED GUIDE!

TO PLANTS. IN THE DESERT.

DO YOU FIND THAT INTEREST-ING?

SMILE

YES!

OH.

I MEAN, NO...

AH

THIS IS THE FIRST REAL CONVERSATION I'VE HAD SINCE MY ARRIVAL.

I SEE...

SO, THEN...

...YOU ALWAYS SEEM TO BE READING SOMETHING. DO YOU READ STORY BOOKS TOO?

OTHER PEOPLE WOULD PROBABLY THINK IT'S... BORING.

I THINK IT'S INTEREST-ING, BUT, WELL...

IT MIGHT NOT BE VERY INTERESTING TO READ ABOUT.

MOST LIKELY...

HMM...

I BROUGHT SO MANY BOOKS WITH ME.

BUT I ALREADY READ THEM ALL...

THERE'S ONE I'VE READ—A LOVE STORY BETWEEN THE PRINCE OF A SMALL KINGDOM AND A PRINCESS.

I LIKE STORIES LIKE THAT...

TWITCH

OH! YES.

YES, I DO.

SO NOW, I...

GLIM

MER

H-HUH? DID I SAY SOMETHING WRONG?

?!

!

GRAB

UMM!

I'VE BEEN SEARCHING FOR SOMEONE LIKE YOU!

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE MY FRIEND?

HUH...?

A FEW DAYS EARLIER.

HMM, HMM, HMMM...

HUM HUM

HUM HUM

THEY'RE ALWAYS SO VERY INTERESTING!

11° 7 BEAM

OH, I DO **SO** LOVE ELISE'S STORIES!

I'M GLAD YOU LIKED IT!

THANK YOU! IT WAS AS ENJOYABLE AS ALWAYS.

ANNE!

SHE STILL HASN'T WRITTEN PAST THE PARTS THAT ANNE TOLD ME IN MY PRISON CELL...

...BUT IT FEELS SO NEW SOMEHOW, READING IT MYSELF!

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONCERN, MILADY!

I'M TOLD SHE'S THRIVING, IN FACT.

GENTLE

BY THE WAY, HOW ARE THINGS BACK HOME FOR YOU?

IS ELISE DOING WELL?

OH?

I'M GLAD TO HEAR IT.

RELIEVED

はぁ……

I NEED ELISE TO STAY HALE AND HEARTY THIS TIME. THAT WAY SHE'LL BE ABLE TO WRITE AN ENDING TO HER STORY!

LET ME KNOW IF ANYTHING EVER COMES UP, THOUGH.

I WILL! THANK YOU VERY MUCH, MILADY.

ELISE IS ONE OF MY OWN, AFTER ALL!

STILL...

TO ADORE AN INTERESTING BOOK IS TO WISH TO DISCUSS IT WITH OTHERS!

THIS IS THE DEFINING TRAIT THAT UNITES ALL BOOK LOVERS!

IT'S SUCH A SHAME!

WHY MUST YOU AND I BE THE ONLY ONES TO READ THIS?

A... SHAME, YOU SAY?

INDEED...

ANNE NEVER SEEMED INTERESTED IN ADVENTURE STORIES LIKE THIS TO BEGIN WITH...

IN FACT, I RECALL THE STORY THAT ANNE TOLD ME IN PRISON BEING QUITE DIFFERENT FROM THIS ONE. WAS SHE JUST SKIMMING THEM, PERHAPS?

HMM... I WONDER...

...AND THEN THE ENEMY LEADER GOT A HEADACHE AND DIED!

MY!

MIGHT THERE BE A FELLOW LITERATURE LOVER AROUND WHO WOULD BE FRIENDS WITH ME?

OHO HO HO...

TO THINK THERE WAS ONE SO NEARBY ALL ALONG!

U-UMM...

I... WELL...

IN TRUTH, IT WAS THE OTHER WAY AROUND. CHLOE ONLY READ SO MUCH BECAUSE SHE FELT AWKWARD ABOUT LOOKING LIKE A LONER.

ピピピピピピピピ

SHE SACRIFICES ALL THE TIME SHE COULD SPEND TALKING WITH FRIENDS TO READ INSTEAD!

SHE **MUST** HAVE A DEEP LOVE OF ALL KINDS OF BOOKS!

EIAIMI

PRINCESS MIA IS THE MOST FAMOUS PERSON IN OUR CLASS.

SHE'S FRIENDS WITH SO MANY OTHER FAMOUS PEOPLE TOO.

WHY WOULD SHE BOTHER TALKING WITH A PERFECTLY ORDINARY GIRL LIKE ME?

BUT...UMM... WHY ME?

OH... I SEE...

THEY CALL HER THE SAINT OF THE EMPIRE. SHE MUST BE OVERFLOWING WITH COMPASSION.

BUT...

IT'S BECAUSE SHE SAW THAT I WAS ALWAYS ON MY OWN AND TOOK PITY ON ME.

...CAN'T STAND THAT THOUGHT.

SOMEHOW...

...I JUST...

...I'VE BEEN SEARCHING FOR A FELLOW BOOK-LOVER!

THE TRUTH IS...

I HAVE SOMETHING I'D VERY MUCH LIKE YOU TO READ!

RUMMAGE

WAIT.

WHAT?

THERE, SEE? SHE REALLY DOES PITY...

YOU'RE LENDING THIS TO ME? ARE YOU SURE?

IT SOUNDS SO INTERESTING...

OH, BUT DOESN'T IT JUST?!

AND SO...

THIS!

TAH-DAH!

THE POOR PRINCE AND THE GOLDEN DRAGON

BY ELISE LITTSTEIN

WOULD IT BE POSSIBLE FOR THE TWO OF US TO BE BOOK BUDDIES?

...

IF...

IF YOU WOULDN'T MIND...

JOY

JOY

JOY

O-Okay...

Go on, read it! Now!

AND SO A FRIENDSHIP THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN UNTHINKABLE IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE WAS FORGED.

IN TIME, CHLOE'S AID WOULD PROVE VITAL TO MIA... BUT OF COURSE, MIA HERSELF HAD NO WAY OF KNOWING THAT.

Tearmoon Empire

Chapter 13

MIA'S LIFE IN HER PRISON CELL WAS TERRIBLY BORING.

5601...

5602...

MUTTER"

MUTTER"

MUTTER"!...

5620...

OR WAIT, WAS IT 30?

MUTTER"

?

MUTTER"

MUTTER"

COUNT-ING CRACKS

THE GAMES SHE IMMERSED HERSELF IN TOLD AN UNSETTLING TALE ABOUT HER MENTAL HEALTH.

OH?

GOOD DAY, YOUR HIGHNESS!

I'M RIGHT HERE, PRINCESS MIA!

GOOD DAY.

GLANCE

MY! HAVE I FINALLY STARTED TO HALLUCI-NATE?

I COULD HAVE SWORN I JUST HEARD ANNE'S VOICE.

BEAM

MY! ANNE!

THREE DAYS AGO

SOB SOB SOB SOB SOB SOB

THANK THE MOONS... I THOUGHT SHE'D FINALLY DECIDED TO ABANDON ME.

THANK YOU EVER SO MUCH FOR COMING!

I'M SORRY I COULDN'T VISIT ALL WEEK! WINTER'S JUST AROUND THE CORNER, AND I'VE BEEN SO BUSY PREPARING...

TODAY'S MY BIRTHDAY, ACTUALLY. THIS IS A GIFT FROM MY FAMILY.

HEE HEE...

THANK YOU.

AH

MY, WHAT A LOVELY SCARF YOU'RE WEARING!

OH...

...

BUT MY OWN FATHER...

...WAS...

YOU...HAVE A WONDERFUL FAMILY...

...DON'T YOU?

MUMBLE

FLUSTER

I-IT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY TOO, PRINCESS MIA?!

...

IT *WAS.* A WEEK AGO.

BUT...YES, YOUR BIRTHDAY!

COME TO THINK OF IT, I JUST HAD MINE AS WELL.

HUH...?

I'M SORRY— I WAS ALWAYS SO BUSY HELPING OUT AT HOME.

THEY LASTED A FULL FIVE DAYS, AND WERE THE BIGGEST EVENT OF EVERY WINTER!

YOU LIVE IN THE CAPITAL, DON'T YOU? HAVEN'T YOU ATTENDED ONE OF MY BIRTHDAY FESTIVALS?

BACK THEN, I THOUGHT IT WAS THE MOST TROUBLESOME THING. BUT NOW THAT IT'S GONE...

WELL...NO MATTER. IT'S ALL IN THE PAST NOW.

COME TO THINK OF IT, I REMEMBER A TIME MY SISTERS BADGERED ME INTO GOING TO A FESTIVAL! I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT IT WAS FOR, THOUGH.

...I MUST ADMIT, I MISS IT A LITTLE.

...

I...

...SEE.

...DY.

...LADY.

MILADY!

HWUH?

AWAKE

YOU'LL CATCH A COLD, SLEEPING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS!

STARE

?

IS SOMETHING WRONG, MILADY?

ANOTHER DREAM FROM BACK THEN...

ANNE...

I STILL REMEMBER WHAT ANNE DID FOR ME A FEW DAYS AFTER THAT.

I'LL NEVER FORGET IT.

NO, NOTHING AT ALL!

IT'S ALMOST TIME TO GO, MILADY.

SHOULD I HELP YOU GET READY?

HM...? AH, THAT'S RIGHT!

YES, PLEASE DO.

YOU SEEM TO BE IN A GOOD MOOD TODAY!

WELL, OF COURSE! THIS IS THE FIRST PRIVATE PARTY I'VE BEEN INVITED TO SINCE SCHOOL BEGAN.

AND MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE HOST OF SAID PARTY...

MISS RANIA?

GOOD. THANK YOU.

WE'VE FINISHED PREPARING THE REFRESHMENTS.

THEY AWAIT YOUR INSPECTION.

...

AND THE DECORA-TIONS? ARE THEY READY?

YES, I BELIEVE SO.

I'LL GO MAKE SURE.

I REALLY CAN'T STAND THIS.

UUUGH.

The Capital

PERUJIN LIES IMMEDIATELY SOUTHWEST OF THE TEARMOON EMPIRE.

Perujin Agricultural Country

ROUGHLY 80% OF ITS POPULACE WORKS IN FARMING AND AGRICULTURE.

RANIA TAFRIF PERUJIN

THIRD PRINCESS OF PERUJIN AGRICULTURAL COUNTRY.

EVERY SPRING, THE ACADEMY'S PERUJIN STUDENTS INVITE THE TEARMOON STUDENTS TO A MEET-AND-GREET. HOWEVER...

...LAST YEAR'S PARTY PROVED DISILLU-SIONING TO RANIA.

OUR THANKS FOR YOUR MOST GRACIOUS INVITATION.

ONLY THREE PEOPLE CAME?

WHAT...?

RIGHT. A PLEASURE, I'M SURE.

I AM A FIRST-YEAR STUDENT AND THE THIRD PRINCESS OF PERUJIN AGRICULTURAL COUNTRY.

TH—

THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING TODAY!

...

HONESTLY, WHY ARE WE BEING SUBJECTED TO THIS NONSENSE?

LET'S GET OUT OF HERE AS SOON AS WE CAN.

WHISPER

WHY...?

SUCH WERE THE TERMS TEARMOON NOBLES USED TO DESCRIBE PERUJIN. AND WHO COULD ARGUE?

A COUNTRY OF SERFS. SECOND-RATE. TRIBUTARY.

PERUJIN WAS INDEED SMALL IN DOMAIN AND PETTY IN MILITARY MIGHT COMPARED TO THE EMPIRE.

WE ALL WORKED SO HARD TO PREPARE FOR THIS, SO WHY...?

IT WAS THE SAME FOR ME AS WELL.

I'M SORRY I PUT YOU THROUGH THIS AWFUL EXPERIENCE, RANIA.

EVERY YEAR I GRITTED MY TEETH, BORE THE HUMILIATION, AND APPEASED TEARMOON'S NOBILITY.

ARSHIA...

I CLENCH

RANIA UNDERSTOOD HER SISTER'S WORDS.

SHE KNEW THAT NO MATTER HOW SHE WAS INSULTED, SHE HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO SILENTLY ENDURE.

IF RELATIONS WITH THE EMPIRE WERE TO WORSEN AND WAR WERE TO BREAK OUT, PERUJIN WOULD BE EFFORTLESSLY CRUSHED.

I WISH THE PARTY WOULD JUST GET CANCELED...

WORN OUT

UGH...

I CAN'T BELIEVE I HAVE TO GO THROUGH THAT MISERY AGAIN THIS YEAR!

IT'S ALL A FARCE ANYWAY.

WHY NOT SNEAK THOSE INTO THE REFRESHMENTS?

...

DING

I GOT IT.

WHAT'S THE HARM? I'M SURE THEY'LL ONLY SEND SECOND-RATE NOBLES AGAIN THIS YEAR, ANYWAY!

EVERYONE WILL RAVE ABOUT HOW DELICIOUS THEY ARE, NEVER KNOWING I'M LAUGHING AT THEIR EVERY WORD!

THANK YOU, PRINCESS RANIA.

PLEASE ACCEPT MY SINCEREST GRATITUDE FOR INVITING ME TO SUCH A WONDERFUL PARTY!

WHY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT TEARMOON NOBLE IN THE WHOLE SCHOOL HERE?!

FSHOCK

WH-WH-WH—

C-CALM DOWN! KEEP IT TOGETHER...

I AM RANIA TAFRIF PERUJIN...

...THIRD PRINCESS OF PERUJIN AGRICUL-TURAL COUNTRY.

TH—

THE PLEASURE IS ALL MINE, YOUR HIGHNESS!

IT IS TRULY A PLEASURE TO MAKE YOUR ACQUAINTANCE.

I AM MIA LUNA TEARMOON, PRINCESS OF THE TEARMOON EMPIRE.

STARE

IT'S UP

...OFFER...

PLEASE MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME AND ENJOY THE FINEST DELICACIES PERUJIN HAS TO...

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMING TO OUR PARTY.

?!

HEH...

MY APOLOGIES! DON'T MIND ME.

HM?

OH.

FLINCH

たじ

AH!

UMM...

Y-YOUR HIGHNESS...?

WHAT WAS THAT?

IT FELT LIKE SHE COULD SEE RIGHT THROUGH ME...

WELL THEN, THANK YOU AGAIN!

AH

I've predicted your every move!

MAYBE SHE REALLY HAS SEEN THROUGH MY PRANK?!

PEOPLE CALL HER THE GREAT SAGE OF THE EMPIRE...

YES, THAT'S RIGHT. I DO REMEMBER HER LOOKING SOMETHING LIKE THAT!

NEEDLESS TO SAY, SHE HADN'T.

PANIC
PANIC
PANIC

SHATTER

MY, WHO MIGHT YOU BE?

?

FORGETTING, OF COURSE, IS PRECISELY WHAT MIA DID LAST TIME.

WHEN THE FAMINE STRUCK AND SHE REQUESTED THAT PERUJIN SELL FOOD TO THE EMPIRE...

HMPH!

AND I WON'T FORGET AGAIN!

IF I WANT TO MAKE CONNECTIONS, I'LL HAVE TO REMEMBER THE FACES OF EVERYONE WHO SEEMS AT ALL IMPORTANT!

YOU SHOULD'VE KNOWN RANIA'S FACE EVEN IF YOU **HADN'T** GONE TO SCHOOL WITH HER!

HOW COULD YOU NOT KNOW WHAT THE ROYALTY AND INFLUENTIAL NOBLES OF OUR NEIGHBORING NATIONS LOOK LIKE?!

SHOUT

SHOUT

SHOUT

LUDWIG'S SNIDE LECTURE LASTED SO LONG THAT DAY I COULD NEVER FORGET IT, NO MATTER HOW MUCH I WISHED TO!

SHIVER

DONE! MEMORIZED FOR SURE!

JUMP

GLANCE

NO... SHE CAN'T HAVE SEEN THROUGH ME. I'M BEING PARANOID.

BESIDES, I DIDN'T PUT OUT MANY OF **THOSE** TO BEGIN WITH.

THERE ARE PLENTY OF OTHER TEA SNACKS AVAILABLE! IT'S PERFECTLY POSSIBLE SHE WON'T END UP EATING ONE!

NOW THEN, LET THE PARTY BEGIN!

IT IS MY DEAREST WISH THAT THIS GATHERING WILL BRING THE GOOD PEOPLE OF TEARMOON AND PERUJIN CLOSER.

SPARKLE

SPARKLE

SPARKLE

AGRICULTURAL COUNTRY INDEED!

OOOH

WHAT A LAVISH SELECTION!

はぅMY!

YOINK
ひょい
YOINK
ひょい
RIGHT...?
N-NO, OF COURSE NOT.
TCH...
PLEASE. THIS IS A SECOND-RATE COUNTRY'S COOKING.
I DOUBT THERE'S ANYTHING HERE WORTH EATING.
YOINK
ひょい
AREN'T YOU GOING TO EAT, EVERYONE?
MY, WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?
DAZED
H-HA HA, I WAS ACTUALLY JUST STARTING TO FEEL HUNGRY!
Y-YES, BUT OF COURSE!

AH!

REACH

THESE COOKIES... AREN'T THEY...?

W—

WAIT! THOSE ARE—

BAM

OH?

MU

NCH

!!!

DUN-

DUN-

DUUUN

YES...

THIS DISTINCTLY WHEATY FLAVOR...

...COUPLED WITH A SUBTLE FLORAL FRAGRANCE...

I KNEW IT.

I'VE TASTED THIS BEFORE!

JUST A FEW DAYS AFTER THE EVENTS OF THE DREAM I HAD EARLIER...

...A COOKIE?

IS THIS...

MY...

YES!

I JUST SO HAPPENED TO GET MY HANDS ON ONE.

CRUNCH
カリ…

Y-YES, OF COURSE! WELL, THEN...

WHISPER
ひそ…

HURRY AND EAT IT!

THE GUARDS WILL TAKE IT FOR THEMSELVES IF THEY NOTICE!

…!

AH

…

AHH...

TREMBLE

HAPPY BIRTHDAY...

...YOUR HIGHNESS.

...!

AH!?

IS THAT WHY YOU GAVE ME THIS?

YES! I'M SORRY IT'S TEN DAYS LATE, THOUGH.

...

BUT...

...WASN'T GETTING IT TERRIBLY DIFFICULT?

BUT STILL...

WHY WOULD SHE GIVE THIS TO ME? WE'RE NOT EVEN FAMILY.

EVER SINCE THE GREAT FAMINE RAVAGED THE CONTINENT, TEARMOON'S FOOD SUPPLIES HAD BEEN ALL BUT NONEXISTENT.

EVEN PRIOR TO HER IMPRISONMENT, SWEETS WERE AN EXTREME RARITY FOR MIA, IN SPITE OF HER ROYAL STATUS.

YES! BUT THIS IS A SPECIAL OCCASION.

AFTER ALL, IT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY!

WELL...

...IT JUST SOUNDED SO SAD TO ME!

IT WOULD BE AWFUL NOT TO CELEBRATE BIRTHDAYS.

OH, JUST LISTEN TO ME.

TEE HEE

I THINK EVERYONE BORN INTO THIS WORLD DESERVES TO HAVE THEIR BIRTHDAY CELEBRATED!

HMPH!

PLEASE FORGIVE MY IMPERTINENCE, YOUR HIGHNESS.

BOW

I GUESS THAT PROBABLY SOUNDED A LITTLE PRETEN-TIOUS.

HEE HEE...

...

NOT AS SHE STEPPED UP TO THE GUILLOTINE...

MIA WOULD NEVER FORGET THE BIRTHDAY SHE CELEBRATED TEN DAYS LATE.

DRIP...

ANNE...

...AND NOT AFTERWARDS.

?

?

UMM... FOR WHAT?

BOW

HUH?

Princess Rania?

She's crying?!

I—

I'M SO SORRY, YOUR HIGHNESS!

THE TRUTH IS, THOSE COOKIES...

W-WELL...

SHOCK

TH—

THREE YEARS AGO?!

...WERE BAKED ABOUT THREE YEARS AGO.

I'M, UH—

EEE

EEK

AH!

UMM!

THESE...

TREMBLE

I'M SO SORRY! IT WAS JUST A SILLY PRANK...

OH NO, JUST LOOK AT HER! SHE'S FURIOUS! WHAT SHOULD I DO?!

...THEY'RE DELICIOUS, EVEN?!

THESE WERE MADE THREE YEARS AGO, AND NOT ONLY ARE THEY EDIBLE...

WE DON'T HAVE THE MEANS TO KEEP OUR CROPS PRESERVED AND PALATABLE IN THE LONG TERM.

AS SUCH, THE POPULACE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO WITHSTAND THE FAMINE ON THEIR OWN.

THE EMPIRE'S AGRICULTURAL METHODS ARE SEVERELY UNDERDEVELOPED.

I KNOW ALL TOO WELL HOW INCREDIBLE THIS COOKIE TRULY IS...

I—

I KNOW! YOU DON'T HAVE TO KEEP TELLING ME OVER AND OVER...

NAG NAG NAG NAG NAG NAG NAG NAG NAG NAG NAG NAG NAG NAG NAG

THE NEIGHBORING NATIONS ARE IN THE SAME STATE, AND DO NOT HAVE THE RESOURCES TO OFFER US SUPPLIES. PERUJIN WAS UNLIKELY TO HELP US, REGARDLESS OF OUR APPROACH.

THAT BEING SAID, FORGETTING THE FACES OF FOREIGN ROYALTY IS INEXCUSABLE. REFLECT UPON YOUR MISTAKES, YOUR HIGHNESS.

NOD

I SEE... SO THIS IS PERUJIN FOOD PRESERVATION...

ABSOLUTELY INCREDIBLE.

UGH! IT'S OVER! IT'S ALL OVER!

WHAT WILL I EVER TELL MY FATHER?

Y—

YOUR HIGH-NESS...

UMM...

HUH?

THE EMPIRE IS, EFFECTIVELY, PERUJIN'S CUSTOMER.

I'M SURE LUDWIG SAID SOMETHING ALONG THOSE LINES!

THE FOOD AT THIS PARTY ISN'T FOR HOSPITALITY'S SAKE—THEY'RE SAMPLES OF PRODUCTS!

PROBABLY!

SHE... COMPLI-MENTED US?

SHE'S... NOT ANGRY?

PRINCESS RANIA WAS TRYING TO DEMONSTRATE PERUJIN'S FOOD PRESERVATION TECHNIQUES TO ME!

SHE WAS NOT.

コゾイ-ッ!!

I UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING NOW.

UMM...

AND THAT MEANS THAT SHE'S QUITE THE CAPABLE PERSON!

LOOK

IN WHICH CASE...

PRINCESS RANIA.

ギュッ
CLENCH

I THOUGHT THAT EVERYONE IN TEARMOON LOOKED DOWN ON PERUJIN...

!

I WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS PERUJIN'S PRESERVATION TECHNIQUES WITH YOU.

MAY I HAVE A MOMENT OF YOUR TIME?

HER HIGHNESS, PRINCESS MIA...

AND YET...

キラキラ
SHINE

...MIGHT BE SOMEONE WHO CAN RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF OUR TECHNIQUES, AND TREAT US AS EQUALS!

Y-YES!

I'D BE HAPPY TO!

DEAL SEALED!

ONLY TIME WILL TELL WHERE THEIR COLLABORATION WILL TAKE THEM...

AND SO A MIRACULOUS PARTNERSHIP WAS BORN THROUGH MUTUAL MISUNDER-STANDING.

THE NEXT DAY.

"I HAVE DECIDED TO ESTABLISH A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH EFFORT WITH PERUJIN TO IMPROVE THEIR FOOD PRESERVATION TECHNOLOGY."

"THUS, I WOULD LIKE YOU TO SEND THEM THE REQUISITE FUNDING," SHE SAYS...

HMM...

MY WORDS, HOWEVER, WEREN'T ENOUGH TO SWAY ANYONE.

YOU WANT ME TO USE ***MY*** LAND FOR ***FARMING?*** WHO WOULD EVER AGREE TO SOMETHING THAT ABSURD?

THE EMPIRE IS RICH WITH FERTILE LAND, BUT OUR NOBLES ARE TOO HOPELESSLY BIASED AGAINST AGRICULTURE ON THE WHOLE TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF IT.

AS SUCH, A SIZABLE PERCENTAGE OF OUR FOOD SUPPLIES ARE IMPORTED FROM NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES.

THAT MEANS THAT WE'RE TOTALLY RELIANT ON THEM. IF A LARGE-SCALE FAMINE WERE TO BREAK OUT, IT COULD SPELL THE END OF THE EMPIRE ITSELF.

IF WE CAN'T INCREASE DOMESTIC PRODUCTION AND BECOME SELF-SUFFICIENT, THE EMPIRE HAS NO FUTURE.

MOST LIKELY, SHE'S ALREADY SEEN THROUGH MY ACTIONS AND INTENTIONS. THAT'S WHY SHE OPENED NEGOTIATIONS WITH PERUJIN.

PRINCESS MIA...

HOWEVER, IF WE START WITH RESEARCH INTO FOOD PRESERVATION, THAT COULD SERVE AS A STEPPING STONE TOWARD BROADER AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT.

ONCE THE NOBILITY CAN SEE THE TANGIBLE BENEFITS, THEIR MINDS MAY BE EASIER TO CHANGE...

THERE TRULY ARE NO WORDS...

THE WISDOM OF THE EMPIRE NEVER FAILS TO IMPRESS!

A NEW LAYER OF FOG DESCENDS UPON LUDWIG'S GLASSES.

Tearmoon Empire

Chapter 14

HM?

A SWORDS-MANSHIP TOURNAMENT?

IS THAT SO?

YES! THE BOYS ARE BESIDE THEMSELVES WITH EXCITEMENT.

IT'S TO BE HELD AT SCHOOL THE WEEK BEFORE SUMMER VACATION, I BELIEVE.

YOU DIDN'T KNOW?

HMM...

WHIZZ

UGH!

ALL ALONE...

I CAN'T SEEM TO RECALL ANY...

A TOURNA-MENT...

MY HEAD!

OH? LUNCH BOXES...?

キャッ EEK

キャッ EEK

TRADITIONALLY, THE ACADEMY'S LADIES PROCURE LUNCH BOXES TO GIVE TO THE BOYS THEY LIKE!

WE WERE WONDERING IF YOU'VE ALREADY PLACED AN ORDER, YOUR HIGHNESS.

?

?

AND YOU SEE, THERE'S SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT THIS TOURNA-MENT!

LUNCH BOXES!!!

THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE

SMUG

OHO HO HO! PREPARE YOURSELF, PRINCE SION!

YOU'LL BE CREDITING YOUR VICTORY TO MY LUNCH BOX BEFORE YOU KNOW IT!

PLEASE GO AWAY.

NO, I DON'T WANT IT.

DRIP

うー…

THAT WAS SO...

...SO...

...SO VERY PAINFUL OF AN EXPERIENCE.

AND AFTER I WENT TO THE TROUBLE TO ARRANGE SUCH A MARVELOUS LUNCH FOR HIM...

UGGGH...

MUTTER ぼそ…

MUTTER ぼそ…

MUTTER ぼそ…

A SOLITARY, SOLO LUNCH DATE.

NO NEED! IT'S NOTHING.

AND THANK YOU EVER SO MUCH FOR TELLING ME ABOUT THE TOURNA-MENT.

D-DOES ANYONE HAVE A HANDKER-CHIEF?!

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS WRONG?!

-SHOCK-

Y—

YOUR HIGHNESS?!

It's the best lunch I've ever eaten, Your Highness!

Sion the Idiot

SMILE にっこり

I KNOW HE WILL!

UNLIKE THAT **IDIOT** PRINCE SION, PRINCE ABEL IS A GENTLEMAN! **HE'LL** EAT MY LUNCH!

FIRST THINGS FIRST: THIS TIME, I NEED TO MAKE ARRANGEMENTS WITH HIM IN ADVANCE!

PRINCE ABEL!

□□□

!

OH, PRINCESS MIA.

YES, AMONG OTHER THINGS.

ARE YOU HERE TO PRACTICE HORSE RIDING AGAIN?

MY...

...AND MOST NOBLES ARE TOO CAPRICIOUS TO PRACTICE ***EVERY*** DAY.

PARTICIPATING IN CLUBS ISN'T MANDATORY...

MALONG SPOKE HIGHLY OF YOU, YOU KNOW.

HE SAYS YOU'VE BEEN PRACTICING VERY DILIGENTLY.

I'M HONORED, TRULY!

LEARNING TO RIDE A HORSE IS AN ABSOLUTE MUST FOR THE SAKE OF AN EMERGENCY ESCAPE!

SHE MUST'VE REALLY TAKEN A SHINE TO THE HORSES!

A SHARP CONTRAST.

EXTEND

WOULD YOU LIKE TO RIDE WITH ME?

!

ANYWAY, THIS IS THE ONLY HORSE AVAILABLE RIGHT NOW, SO...

STROKE...

YOUR PALM HAS GROWN RATHER FIRM, HASN'T IT?

HM? AH, YES...

OH? WELL, SINCE YOU'VE BEEN SO KIND AS TO OFFER, I'LL GLADLY...

...HM?

I'VE BEEN PRACTICING.

THERE'S A SWORDSMANSHIP TOURNAMENT COMING UP, YOU SEE.

BA-DUMP...

COME TO THINK OF IT, I SUPPOSE THE KNIGHTS BACK HOME HAD SIMILARLY CALLOUSED HANDS.

OH, HAVE YOU NOW?

YOU REALLY ARE TRYING YOUR HARDEST...

...AREN'T YOU, PRINCE ABEL?

UM...

...PRINCE ABEL?

WELL...

THERE'S SOMETHING I WANTED TO ASK.

ABOUT THE TOURNAMENT...

YES?

NO, NONE IN PARTICULAR.

!

JUMP

DO YOU ALREADY, UMM...

...HAVE PLANS FOR YOUR LUNCH ON THAT DAY?

MY LUNCH?

BA-DUMP

HUH? FOR *ME?*

YES!

IN THAT CASE...

...WOULD IT BE ALL RIGHT IF I PREPARED A LUNCH BOX FOR YOU?

WELL, THAT'S PERFECT!

*AND WITH THAT, THERE'S NO **WAY** I'LL END UP EATING ALONE LIKE LAST TIME!*

I'LL DO MY BEST TO BRING SOMETHING THAT WILL HELP YOU WIN.

OR SO SHE THOUGHT.

THIS WILL BE SIMPLICITY ITSELF!

I CAN HANDLE THAT! I'VE WATCHED LUDWIG BUY THINGS IN THE PAST!

I'LL JUST HAVE TO GO AND PLACE AN ORDER FOR A LUNCH BOX, ONE OF THESE DAYS.

I'M AFRAID THAT WON'T BE POSSIBLE.

THAT DAY? OH, DEAR.

AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT GOING TO ANNE FOR ADVICE?

PARDON?

...

TREMBLE

TREMBLE

ALL THE STORES AROUND HERE ARE FULLY BOOKED, SO I DON'T THINK YOU'LL FIND ANYONE WHO CAN TAKE ANOTHER RESERVATION.

M—

Wh—

WHATEVER COULD YOU MEAN?

WE'RE JUST TOO BUSY. YOU WOULD'VE HAD TO HAVE ORDERED A WEEK IN ADVANCE.

IT'S STILL FOUR DAYS AWAY, IS IT NOT?

CRASH

A—

AAANNE!!

MERCIFUL MOONS, WHAT SHOULD I DO?!

I THINK... THIS MIGHT JUST WORK OUT AFTER ALL.

I SPOKE WITH SOME ACQUAINTANCES AROUND TOWN.

DROOP...

MOST ORDINARY LUNCH BOXES ARE PACKED WITH LIGHT, EASY TO CARRY FOODS THAT DON'T SPOIL, LIKE JERKY AND DRIED BREAD.

NO. NONE OF THEM COULD MANAGE IT.

SHAKE

I KNEW I COULD COUNT ON YOU, ANNE!

YOU FOUND A STORE THAT WILL MAKE ONE FOR ME?

RESOLVED!

TH-
THEN...

WHAT IN THE MOONS WILL WE DO?

THERE'S JUST NOT MUCH DEMAND FOR LUXURIOUS LUNCH BOXES ON AN ISLAND LIKE THIS.

THAT'S WHY THERE AREN'T MANY STORES THAT CAN EVEN MAKE ONE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

LET'S MAKE ONE OURSELVES!

HUH?

BUT I'VE NEVER COOKED SO MUCH AS A SINGLE MEAL.

LISTEN TO ME, MILADY.

FOR ORDINARY FOLKS, A WIFE MAKING AN ESPECIALLY NICE LUNCH BOX FOR HER HUSBAND IS SOMETHING SPECIAL. IT'S CONSIDERED AN EXPRESSION OF LOVE!

YOU'LL PERSONALLY PREPARE A LUNCH BOX FOR PRINCE ABEL, AND I'LL HELP!

I'VE ALREADY MADE ARRANGE-MENTS FOR THE INGREDIENTS!

M—

MAKE ONE?!

MYSELF?!

I—

IS THAT HOW IT WORKS?!

AND BY THE WAY, ANNE...

Yes!

IN OTHER WORDS, FOR MEN, HAVING A LADY COOK THEM A MEAL IS A SOURCE OF JOY!

STIF

FEN

ARE YOU WELL-VERSED IN THE ART OF COOKING?

...

I'VE BAKED BREAD BEFORE.

AT LEAST ONCE.

OH, I KNOW THAT LOOK. THAT MEANS WE'RE DOOMED!

SENSING AN IMPENDING DISASTER, MIA SETS OUT TO ASSEMBLE A TEAM OF HELPERS!

HUH?

COOKING?

I'M FAMILIAR WITH THE TOPIC!

SMILE

I'VE READ ALL ABOUT IT.

THAT'S RIGHT. I WAS WONDER-ING IF YOU KNEW MUCH ABOUT IT.

OH, YES, I DO.

I HAVE A FEELING I'LL HAVE NO LUCK WITH HER EITHER.

FAMILIAR WITH THE TOPIC...

*SHE'S **READ** ALL ABOUT IT...*

AS FOR MY NEXT TARGET...

OH, YES, I'M FREE THAT DAY. I CAN HELP IF YOU'D LIKE.

HM?

BUT BEGGARS CAN'T BE CHOOSERS!

THAT'S ONE HELPER SECURED!

CLENCH

I'm visiting my homeland!

OUT OF IDEAS IN RECORD TIME.

SHOCK

WAIT!

I CAN'T THINK OF **ANYONE** ELSE WHO COULD HELP!

MILADY!

AH

GAAAH!!!

FINDING SOMEONE WHO CAN COOK IN A SCHOOL ATTENDED EXCLUSIVELY BY THE CHILDREN OF NOBLES WAS A LOST CAUSE IN THE FIRST PLACE!

WHERE IS SHE?

YES! IT SEEMS SHE HELPS IN THE KITCHEN AT HOME SOMETIMES.

I MUST MEET WITH HER AT ONCE!

ALL RIGHT!

I FOUND ONE!

I KNOW SOMEONE WHO CAN COOK!

!

TRULY?!

DO YOU NEED SOMETHING?

OH, PRINCESS MIA!

GEH?!

HORROR

Tiona!!!

DROP DEAD!

I'M SURE SHE'S MY MORTAL ENEMY WHO SENT ME TO THE GUILLOTINE!

SHE'S AT THE TOP OF THE LIST OF PEOPLE I WANT TO AVOID!

A-ANNE? WOULD MISS TIONA HAPPEN TO BE THE ONE...?

YES! I'M SURE SHE'LL BE ABLE TO HELP!

UGH... BUT BEGGARS CAN'T BE CHOOSERS...

I-IS IT TRUE, MISS TIONA, THAT YOU'RE GOOD AT COOKING?

YES, I'D SAY SO!

MY HOME IS ON A LARGE ESTATE, AND WE USE THE EXTRA SPACE AS FARMLAND.

OH!

SHE MIGHT ACTUALLY BE ABLE TO HELP!

OUR SERVANTS SPEND MOST OF THEIR TIME WORKING THE FIELDS, SO I END UP HELPING COOK QUITE OFTEN.

HM?

FLEX

MY JOB WAS ALWAYS TO HANDLE THE VEGETABLES!

YOU CAN LEAVE THE CHOPPING TO ME!

THIS SEEMS...

...QUESTIONABLE.

I'm not bad at peeling either!

I CAN MINCE THEM TOO!

AND... YOUR OTHER SKILLS?

FLUSTERED

あ
あ

AND BESIDES, I DON'T HAVE ANYONE TO GIVE ONE TO...

WITH YOU? BUT YOU'RE A PRINCESS! I COULDN'T POSSIBLY...

WOULD YOU LIKE TO MAKE ONE WITH ME?

Y-YOU SEE, MISS TIONA...

I'M PLANNING TO PREPARE A LUNCH BOX TO GIVE TO PRINCE ABEL ON THE DAY OF THE SWORDSMANSHIP TOURNAMENT.

HOWEVER, MIA DID NOT HAVE THE LEEWAY TO BE PICKY ABOUT HER HELPERS.

HUH...?

BY MY BEST ESTIMATE, THE ODDS OF THESE LUNCH BOXES TURNING OUT WELL ARE RATHER LOW.

IN THE WORST CASE, THEY MIGHT BE INEDIBLE ENOUGH TO UPSET PRINCE ABEL'S STOMACH AND IMPAIR HIM DURING THE TOURNAMENT.

THAT SAID...

DING!

OH!

SOMEONE TO GIVE IT TO...

I KNOW! THERE'S ALWAYS THAT MISERA—

AHEM!!!

WITH PRINCE SION...?

THAT IS, THERE'S ALWAYS PRINCE SION! WHY DON'T WE MAKE SOME EXTRA AND SHARE IT WITH HIM?

THIS IS THE PERFECT CHANCE FOR PAYBACK!

IF I MAKE SURE PRINCE SION EATS THE SAME THING, I'LL DRAG HIM DOWN AT THE SAME TIME!

MIA ENGAGES IN YET MORE PETTY SCHEMING.

OHO HO HO HO

AND EVEN BETTER, IT WON'T JUST BE MY FAULT! TIONA WILL SHARE THE BLAME, AND PRINCE SION WON'T ONLY RESENT ME FOR IT!

WHAT A PERFECT WAY TO GET MY REVENGE!

LITTLE DID MIA KNOW THAT INVOLVING PRINCE SION IN HER SCHEME WOULD CARRY IT IN AN ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT DIRECTION.

THE NEXT DAY

SAINT-NOEL TRAINING GROUNDS

BAM

FWSH

SLICE

CLAP

CLAP

HARD AT WORK BRIGHT AND EARLY, EH, MILORD?

CLAP

CLAP

AH, KEITHWOOD.

YOU WALK LIKE A PHANTOM, AS ALWAYS.

I DIDN'T NOTICE YOU AT ALL.

キラ SPARKLE

キラ SPARKLE

I'D BET HE COULD STEAL MOST ANY LADY'S HEART IF SHE SAW HIM LIKE THIS.

I'VE POLITELY DECLINED ALL THE OFFERS I'VE RECEIVED SO FAR.

I DON'T PLAN TO ACCEPT ANYONE'S.

OH?

SO, HAVE YOU DECIDED WHOSE LUNCH BOX YOU'LL BE ACCEPTING?

I GET THE URGE TO HAVE A TASTE OF YOUR COOKING EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE.

WHY NOT?

SHOULD I TAKE THAT TO MEAN YOU'RE HOPING *I'LL* MAKE YOU LUNCH?

FRIED POULTRY'S ON THE MENU TONIGHT, MILORD!

YOU'D SNEAK INTO THE KITCHENS, NIGHT AFTER NIGHT.

YOU USED TO COOK FOR ME ALL THE TIME, REMEMBER?

BUT OF COURSE! I *AM* THE PRINCE OF A VAST KINGDOM.

FUSSING OVER FLAVORS IS PART OF THE JOB.

HA HA

NO LEMON?

ALL FOR YOUR SAKE, MILORD! YOUR MEALS MAY HAVE BEEN NUTRITIOUS, BUT WITH HOW BLAND THEY WERE, ANYONE WOULD TIRE OF THEM.

AND YET FOR ALL MY GOOD WILL, I SEEM TO RECALL YOU BEING QUITE THE HARSH CRITIC.

...

I'M SURE YOU'VE ALREADY MADE ARRANGE-MENTS FOR MY LUNCH.

HAVEN'T YOU?

ALL JOKES ASIDE...

NOT THAT HE'S WRONG, BUT IT WOULDN'T KILL HIM TO EASE UP A LITTLE.

GETTING TOO FRIENDLY WITH ANY ONE PERSON COULD HARM OUR KINGDOM DOWN THE ROAD...OR AT LEAST, I'D BET THAT'S WHAT HE'S THINKING.

THE TITLE OF CROWN PRINCE OF SUNKLAND IS JUST TOO WEIGHTY TO LET HIM.

MILORD SION HAS NO INTENTION OF ACCEPTING A LUNCH BOX FROM ANYONE.

WAVE

AND I'M OFF. BEST OF LUCK WITH YOUR TRAINING, MILORD.

CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE, KEITHWOOD?

OH, NO, NOT AT ALL.

MILORD SION'S A BOY IN HIS TEENS.

HE MISSED EATING GOOD FOOD ENOUGH TO WHINE TO ME BEFORE...

...AND NOW, HE MAY WELL BE MISSING THE CHANCE TO HAVE SOMEONE MAKE A NICE LUNCH BOX FOR HIM.

HMM...

I DON'T IMAGINE MILORD SION WOULD SAY NO IF **SHE** OFFERED HIM ONE.

BUT IT SEEMS SHE'S ALREADY PROMISED TO GIVE ONE TO PRINCE ABEL...

AH, KEITHWOOD!

MIND'S EYE

OF COURSE, THERE ARE ONLY SO MANY PEOPLE HE COULD EVEN SAY YES TO.

ONLY ONE NATION COMES TO MIND THAT COULD MATCH SUNKLAND IN PRESTIGE, AND THAT WOULD BE...

YES, ACTUALLY!

YOU SEE...

OH, IF IT ISN'T LADY RUDOLVON.

CAN I BE OF SERVICE?

TMP

TMP

PERFECT TIMING!

OH?

AT THE SAME TIME, PRINCESS MIA WILL GET TO COMMUNICATE HER DESIRE TO FORGE A FRIENDSHIP WITH HIM.

*SO THE THREE OF THEM WILL WORK TOGETHER TO MAKE LUNCH FOR MILORD SION **AND** PRINCE ABEL.*

THAT MEANS HE WON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT TROUBLESOME RUMORS CLAIMING HE'S HAVING A TRYST WITH ANY ONE PARTICULAR GIRL.

SO, IF YOU WOULDN'T MIND ASKING PRINCE SION IF HE'D BE WILLING TO ACCEPT A LUNCH BOX FROM US...

SHIVER

THE GREAT SAGE OF THE EMPIRE LIVES UP TO HER—

IMPRESSIVE, PRINCESS MIA.

SHE'S THOUGHT THIS ALL OUT DOWN TO THE LAST DETAIL.

UNDERSTOOD. I'LL PASS THAT ALONG TO HIM.

IS IT REALLY THAT SIMPLE?

REALLY?

モヤ ヤヤヤヤヤヤヤヤヤ
OMINOOOOOOUS

SOMEHOW, IT FEELS LIKE A TERRIBLE DANGER IS BEARING DOWN UPON MILORD SION.

LIKE SOMETHING AWFUL IS GOING TO HAPPEN ON THE DAY OF THE TOURNAMENT...

...

THANK YOU SO MUCH!

SMILE

I SUPPOSE...

...IT WOULDN'T BE A BAD IDEA TO CHECK IN ON THEM.

WE'LL DO OUR BEST!

WE'RE ALL ABOUT TO DO A TEST RUN FOR THE LUNCH BOXES!

THE KITCHEN

...

THWAP

tew

THWAP

tew

UMM. YOUR HIGHNESS?

WHAT IS THAT?

NO...

GLINT

OHO HO! YOU'VE A KEEN EYE, KEITHWOOD.

THIS IS NONE OTHER THAN MY MASTER-PIECE!

MY, KEITHWOOD!

ARE YOU HERE FOR A SNACK, PERHAPS?

DA-DA-DAAAAAAH!

テ、テテテー！

HORSE BREAD!

THAT SAID, THIS CREATION OF YOURS HAS A FATAL FLAW.

IF YOU WOULD, MISS ANNE?

GULP

RIGHT!

SMUG

SMUG

PRINCE ABEL LOVES HORSES ENOUGH TO HAVE JOINED THE HORSEMANSHIP CLUB.

I'M CERTAIN HE'LL APPRECIATE SOMETHING LIKE THIS!

...

I SEE. YOU'RE RIGHT IN THE SENSE THAT CONSIDERING WHO YOU'RE COOKING FOR IS THE FIRST STEP OF COOKING.

WRONG.

PINCH
PINCH
Hmm.
YOU SEE, PRINCESS MIA, HORSES DON'T LOOK *QUITE* LIKE THIS!
YOU'LL HAVE TO ADJUST THE EARS A LITTLE, SEE...?
AND YOU'D NEED AN OVEN THE SIZE OF AN ACTUAL HORSE TO BAKE IT AT ALL!
WITH THIS MUCH DOUGH, THE OUTSIDE WILL BE CHARRED BEFORE THE INSIDE'S HALF-BAKED!
LOOM
THWACK
THIS SIZE, OR SOMETHING CLOSE TO IT!
AHHH!
SKKG
MAKE IT SMALLER AND REGULARLY SHAPED!
SHOCK
DO YOU UNDERSTAND, YOUR HIGHNESS?!

DO. YOU. UNDER-STAND?!

WELL... FINE. WE'LL DO IT YOUR WAY, THEN.

POUT

...

AH, KEITHWOOD!

ANNOYED

My, so demand-ing...

BAAAM

I'VE PREPARED THE VEGETABLES! WHAT DO YOU THINK?

THAT'S RIGHT!

MOUNTAINOUS

I SEE YOU'RE, UMM...

...QUITE ADEPT AT CHOPPING VEGETABLES, LADY RUDOLVON.

HM?

SNIFF

I WAS UNDER THE IMPRESSION THIS WAS NORMAL...

ARE YOU SURE?

WHERE IN THE WORLD IS THIS NORMAL?!

HUH?

THAT SAID... I'M AFRAID THAT MILORD SION AND PRINCE ABEL ARE NOT, IN FACT, HERBIVORES.

I CAN'T SEE THEM POLISHING OFF THIS MANY, NO MATTER HOW WELL THEY'RE SLICED.

THE MEAT...

...IS DONE...

...ROAST-ING!

BAM

DOES ANYONE ELSE SMELL...?

USE AN OVEN, PLEASE.

This isn't the wilder-ness!

SLOW-ROASTED

I COOKED IT...

...IN THE COURT-YARD!

CLENCH

SIZZLE

WELL, THIS...DOES LOOK WELL-ROASTED INDEED, MISS LIORA.

YES!

YOU KNOW WE'LL BE SERVING THIS TO PRINCES, DON'T YOU?

SHOULD I...COOK IT MORE?

FROM A HYGIENIC STANDPOINT ALONE, THIS WOULD NEVER MAKE IT TO THE TABLE.

TRY TO KEEP IN MIND WHO YOU'LL BE SERVING THIS TO.

HE'S RIGHT, LIORA.

SHE'S EVEN BROUGHT A RECIPE BOOK...

PHEW...

*AT LEAST **SHE** HAS SOME COMMON SENSE.*

OH, THANK THE SUN THE FORKROADS' DAUGHTER IS HERE TO HELP!

Taste the Adventure!
Exotic Recipes for Exotic Delicacies

ABSOLUTELY NOT. NO RAW MEAT. NONE.

LISTEN CAREFULLY, OKAY?

TASTE IS BEST PRESERVED WHEN THE INGREDIENTS ARE SERVED RAW, SO—

HORSEMEN DON'T ***EAT*** HORSES, THEY ***RIDE*** THEM! ARE YOU ***TRYING*** TO OFFEND HIM?!

AND SINCE PRINCE ABEL IS IN THE HORSEMANSHIP CLUB, I THOUGHT A RECIPE WITH HORSE IN IT WOULD BE PERFECT.

THE HORSE BREAD WAS BAD ENOUGH—THIS IS ON A WHOLE DIFFERENT LEVEL!

TASTY...

HUH? BUT WHY?

IT SAYS IN THIS BOOK THAT RAW HORSE LIVER IS A DELICACY!

THERE'S NOTHING MORE DANGEROUS THAN AN AMATEUR COOK WHO KNOWS JUST ENOUGH TO GET EVERYTHING WRONG...

OH? MY BOOK DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING OF THE SORT.

NOT TO MENTION THAT THE ONLY PLACE YOU SHOULD EAT ANY SORT OF RAW ORGAN IS AT A SPECIALTY RESTAURANT.

TWIRL

TWIRL

TWIRL

SWEET SUN ABOVE, WHAT HAVE I GOTTEN MYSELF INTO?

TWIRL

CLENCH

I HAVE TO ACT NOW, BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE...

THERE'S STILL MORE OF THEM?!

IT REALLY IS.

KNEAD

KNEAD

IT'S SUCH A SHAME.

I DO WISH THAT RANIA COULD HAVE HELPED US COOK TODAY!

MY DEAR PRINCESSES AND LADIES!

I NEED YOU TO LISTEN VERY CAREFULLY TO WHAT I'M ABOUT TO SAY.

ON THE DAY YOU MAKE YOUR LUNCH BOXES...

...I NEED YOU TO FOLLOW MY ORDE—

...MY SUGGES-TIONS. PLEASE.

HUH?

SAND-WICHES?

BUT WOULDN'T SOMETHING MORE ELABORATE BE—

WE'LL KEEP THINGS SIMPLE, AND JUST MAKE SANDWICHES.

DO YOU UNDER-STAND?

MU MU

JUMP

EEEK!

GLARE

DO. YOU. UNDER-STAND?

SEEMS I'VE JUST JUMPED ONTO A BURNING SHIP WITH NO PORT IN SIGHT.

NOTHING LEFT BUT TO SEE THE VOYAGE THROUGH.

WONDER-FUL. JUST WONDER-FUL.

Y-YES!

TREMBLE

TREMBLE

YES, I DO!

FOR THE SAKE OF MILORD SION AND PRINCE ABEL'S STOMACHS!

AND SO BEGINS KEITHWOOD THE SENSIBLE'S CAMPAIGN FOR CULINARY DECENCY.

THREE DAYS REMAIN UNTIL THE SWORDSMANSHIP TOURNAMENT...

Tearmoon Empire

SIGH

AFTER MIA'S COOKING PRACTICE

THAT WAS EXHAUSTING...

UGGGH.

Side Story

AH

...BAD...

STILL, I DIDN'T EXPECT IT TO BE THAT...

I KNEW THAT EXPECTING THE DAUGHTERS OF NOBLES TO COOK A DECENT MEAL WAS A TALL ORDER.

*WHAT IF I **HADN'T** GONE TO CHECK UP ON THEM?*

HOW WOULD THE DAY OF THE TOURNAMENT HAVE TURNED OUT THEN?

HYPOTHE-TICALLY...

KEITHWOOD!

GOOD DAY TO YOU!

WOULD YOU HAPPEN TO HAVE A MOMENT TO SPARE?

IF IT ISN'T PRINCESS MIA!

HOW CAN I HELP YOU TODAY?

I WAS JUST SEARCHING FOR SOMEONE WHO COULD LEND US A HAND.

RIGHT OVER THERE!

IT CONCERNS PRINCE ABEL AND PRINCE SION'S LUNCH BOX, YOU SEE.

IT TURNED OUT RATHER LARGE AND UNWIELDY.

IF YOU'D BE SO KIND, WOULD YOU HELP US CARRY IT?

I THINK I CAN HANDLE THAT. WHERE IS IT?

BAM

IT'S OUR SPECIALLY MADE HORSE BREAD!

HALF-BAKED

?

LIVER (RAW)

JUST SO MUCH CABBAGE

HEH...

OR PERHAPS THIS HAS TRANSCENDED THE LEVEL OF MERE LUNCH BOXES!

AH, KEITH-WOOD!

PERHAPS THIS IS NOTHING LESS THAN A WORK OF *ART!*

PRINCESS MIA? WHAT IS *THAT?*

WHY, A LUNCH BOX, OF COURSE!

THAT

GOOD DAY!

DID YOU COME TO CHECK IN ON US?

DOES "RESTRAINT" MEAN NOTHING TO YOU?!

LOOK! WE USED CABBAGE TO REPRESENT THE HORSE'S PASTURE!

ALL THAT CHOPPING WAS WORTH THE EFFORT!

There's enough for seconds!

FSHHH

I BAKED IT...

...IN THE COURTYARD!

YOU MEAN YOU TORCHED IT!

That's not how bread works!

OOZE

THE BEST WAY TO BRING OUT AN INGREDIENT'S FLAVOR IS TO SERVE IT RAW!

WE USED HORSE LIVER TO REPRESENT A HEART!

YOU CAN'T SERVE MEAT RAW!

And don't just shove it in there!

I THOUGHT SOMETHING WAS OFF AS WELL.

MAYBE I SHOULD'VE BEEN MORE INSISTENT ABOUT IT...

MISS ANNE...?

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN? WEREN'T YOU AROUND TO STOP THEM?

OH... I'M SORRY ABOUT THAT.

WRONG. NOT EVEN CLOSE.

PINCH

PINCH

THE EARS AREN'T QUITE RIGHT, ARE THEY? I REALLY SHOULD'VE HAD THEM RESHAPE THEM!

AH!

IS THERE STILL TIME FOR ME TO MAKE ONE MYSELF AND SWAP THEM OUT?

WHAT SHOULD I DO? I COULD NEVER LET MILORD SION WITNESS THIS DISASTER.

ARRRGH

SWEET SUN ABOVE, WHY?!

PRINCE ABEL! PRINCE SION!

OHO HO HO! NO NEED TO RESIST THE URGE—WE MADE THIS FOR THE TWO OF YOU TO ENJOY!

I-IT'S... PRACTICALLY A WORK OF ART! IT WOULD ALMOST BE A SHAME TO EAT IT.

PAT

STARE

IS THAT... A HORSE?

THAT'S RIGHT, AND IT'S ALSO YOUR LUNCH BOX!

EAT UP! THERE'S PLENTY FOR BOTH OF YOU!

GO ON, THEN!

IT'S NOT HARD TO IMAGINE WHAT WOULD BECOME OF THE TWO PITIABLE PRINCES.

...I WENT TO CHECK ON THEM.

THANK THE SUN...

HMM...

I TOLD THEM TO MAKE SIMPLE SANDWICHES, BUT THERE'S NO TELLING WHAT MADNESS THE PRINCESS AND HER COHORTS COULD STILL GET UP TO.

I'LL HAVE TO KEEP A FIRM HANDLE ON THEIR WHOLE OPERATION.

NO... I CAN'T REST EASY YET.

HANG IN THERE, KEITHWOOD!

I WONDER IF ANYONE HAS ANY STOMACH MEDICINE HANDY...?

...

Short Story

A Parting Gift for a Friend Afield

A Parting Gift for a Friend Afield

"Fwaaah..."

"That was rather uncouth, Lady Rania."

Rania Tafrif Perujin, princess of Perujin Agricultural Country, frowned as her attendant scolded her for the massive yawn she'd just let out. She surreptitiously stuck out her tongue as she wiped the sleep from her eyes.

"Who would even be watching me this early in the morning?" Rania muttered as she looked out over the Noelige Lake. The water shimmered in the morning sunlight as a gentle breeze stirred its surface. They were on a pier that jutted out over the lake, and a gentle splash rang out each time the waves lapped against its posts. One could hardly ask for a more beautiful morning to look out across the harbor.

"We're lucky it's so clear today! This is perfect traveling weather," said Rania's attendant.

Rania nodded in agreement, then looked up to the sky above. Being from an agricultural nation, the people of Perujin didn't consider sunny, cloudless days to be *good* weather, per se. Sunlight was one of the heavens' blessings, to be sure, but rain was a blessing of equal importance. Hence, a clear, sunny day like this was commonly referred to as *traveling* weather rather than *good* weather. The name, of course, was apt in a number of ways. Much as Rania would not want to deny the plants their sustenance, she knew her

mood would have been much more subdued had the weather been dark and stormy.

"The boat has arrived, Lady Rania!"

Rania turned toward the voice that rang out just in time to see the vessel pull into port. That boat, she knew, would be carrying her across the lake in short order.

Summer vacation began earlier for the princess of Perujin than it did for the rest of Saint-Noel's students. So it had been for her predecessors, and so it was for Rania as well. When the season for wheat harvesting arrived, one of her duties as the nation's princess was to stand before her people, rouse their spirits, and reap the first stalks of grain. Then, when the harvest was finished, she would perform a ceremonial dance in thanks for the year's crop and in prayer for a bountiful harvest come the next summer. These were the most important duties for a Perujin princess.

When Rania was young, she took the fact that she would have to return home at this time of year for granted. It was a given, in her eyes—that was simply the way things were done in the society she was born and raised in. Did she wish she could see the swordsmanship tournament with the other students? Did she long to take advantage of her summer freedom to tour the local stores? Did she wish to at least bid her friends farewell with a wave and promise to meet them again after summer ended? The answers were no, no, and no, respectively...or at least, they *had* been up until this year.

Somehow, for reasons Rania found herself unable to explain, she felt a certain sense of reluctance to return home. As she stood on the island's pier, she found her eyes drawn back inland, toward the school. A sigh slipped out through her lips.

"It's been a long semester, hasn't it, Lady Rania?" said Rania's attendant, her brow furrowed with concern. "Life at the Academy can be preoccupying, I'm sure."

It seemed she was misunderstanding something, but Rania didn't bother correcting her. She *was* preoccupied, after all, at least in a certain sense. She replied with a forced smile and a quick nod.

"I'm sure His Majesty will be very pleased to hear of your accomplishments, though," the attendant continued.

"Yes, I imagine he will," Rania curtly replied as her mind drifted back to the party she'd recently hosted. She'd been prepared to entertain another motley assortment of second- or third-rate nobles' children, but just as resignation was setting in, a *real* princess had appeared out of nowhere. And not just any princess—it was the empire's very own Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon.

Not only had Mia approached Rania in an exceptionally friendly manner, she had also acknowledged Perujin's value as a nation and even proposed a collaborative research initiative between Perujin and the empire. And that wasn't all—she'd even agreed to attend tea parties that Rania had hosted on a number of occasions since! Princess Mia would always lavish the sweets that Rania served with extravagant praise as she devoured them with gusto. The sight alone was enough to put a smile on Rania's face—all the more so considering the kindness that Princess Mia had shown her, compared to the lack thereof she'd received from every other imperial noble she'd interacted with up to that point. Before she knew it, Rania found herself thinking of Mia as her fast friend.

Perhaps that would explain it. Perhaps that was why setting out early to return home all by her lonesome made Rania feel ever so slightly desolate... *But no*, she thought to herself, shaking her head. She couldn't let sentiment get in the way of her duties. Rania knew

she had to return home and inform everyone of what had happened between her and Princess Mia as soon as possible. Keeping their relationship as her special little secret would be unacceptable conduct for a princess of Perujin. Good news was meant to be shared, and shared as soon as possible...but still, she couldn't stop herself from feeling conflicted.

That was when a voice rang out. "Miss Rania!"

"Hm? What...?" muttered Rania as she snapped out of her musings and looked up reflexively. Instantly, her eyes widened with wonder. "Huh? But...why?"

The sight that greeted Rania's gaze was truly dazzling. There she was, her bewitchingly regal platinum-blonde hair dancing in the breeze and glistening in the morning sunlight. Indeed, Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon practically glowed as she rushed over to Rania's side.

"Oh, good! I made it," said Mia with a sigh of relief. It seemed she'd run all the way to the pier. Her shoulders were heaving as she caught her breath, but any discomfort that might have shown through on her face was overwhelmed by her relieved smile.

"But... Why are *you* here, Princess Mia?" asked Rania, cocking her head. "And so early..."

"Why?" parroted Mia. "To see my friend off, of course! I would think that was obvious."

"Your friend? You mean...me?"

Mia smiled brilliantly. "Well, of course! You're a very important person to me, and Perujin is a very important nation to my empire! I simply wanted to wish you safe travels and a pleasant voyage," said Mia, taking Rania's hand in her own.

Oh, thank the moons I made it! Mia thought to herself. She had overslept spectacularly and only barely arrived at the pier before

Rania's departure. Now, though, she could let out a sigh of relief—her precious connection with a member of Perujin's royal family was secure. Losing a resource with *that* much potential to put her a step ahead of the guillotine because of a careless mistake would be simply unacceptable! Mia had been taking great care to stay in intermittent contact with Rania for that precise purpose.

"Oh, that's right! I have something for you, Miss Rania," Mia said as she spun around to give her ever-present maid, Anne, a nod. Anne clearly understood the meaning of the gesture, and stepped forward to hand a box she'd been carrying in both hands over to Rania.

"Umm... What is this? Rania asked.

"A present...or something along those lines, in any case," Mia replied. Rania wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but she still opened the box up and peeked inside to find a broad-brimmed hat.

"I thought long and hard about what would make an appropriate gift for you, but I'm afraid that in the end, nothing seemed quite right. Then I thought that the sun might be harsh on your skin while you were harvesting grain, and bought this in the hopes it would help... but *then* it occurred to me that you may well have something even more effective back in Perujin already! Please don't force yourself to wear it if you do."

Mia's pulse picked up ever so slightly as she gave her little speech. *Was this the right choice after all...?* she wondered. The moment she learned that Rania would be returning to Perujin, you see, a certain thought had struck Mia.

Hm? She's fed me plenty of sweets, but...have I done anything for her *whatsoever?*

Among nobility, if one was invited to a tea party, it was common courtesy to return the favor. Hospitality was to be repaid with hospitality, and failure to do so was a surefire way to slight your

acquaintances! And Mia...had failed to do so. In fact, she had hosted precisely none of the tea parties between her and Rania. She had at least *attempted* to play the part of the host and invite Rania herself once, in all fairness, but Rania had offered to bring the sweets and Mia had caved to temptation without batting an eyelash.

"How could I help myself? Perujin sweets are just so much better than ours!" Or so Mia told herself, but her excuses would never be more than just that—excuses—and Mia was painfully aware of it.

If I tried that line on that accursed four-eyes, I'm sure he'd give me the lecture of a lifetime. No, this was not the time for half-baked excuses. This was the time to act, and to make up for her past mistakes! *I have to give her something in return for the sweets! Some sort of present! But what...?*

Unfortunately for Mia, after all that agonizing over what she could do to repay Rania, she could do nothing but agonize even more over exactly what to gift her. Bearing in mind they were both young women, a fancy accessory or jewelry seemed like an apt option. Or perhaps a bouquet? Somehow, though, those tried and true gifts just didn't seem quite *right*. *After all,* Mia mused, *you can't* eat *jewelry, and there's no real use for a bouquet of flowers!* Indeed, though once Mia had been all but obsessed with such trinkets in the way one would imagine any princess would be, now her mind was forever preoccupied by more practical matters!

Of course, I must also consider that Rania had the cunning to conceal those long-lasting cookies among the other refreshments at her party in an effort to prove the worth of her nation's technology. An ordinary *gift would be more likely to amuse her than impress her!* At the end of all that worrying, Mia's chickenhearted instincts led her to a decision: to err on the side of utility and buy Rania something practical, useful, and not too terribly expensive.

"I heard you'll have to do a lot of farmwork back home, so I thought a hat might be useful... But they didn't have any that seemed especially nice on the island, so if you have a better one, don't feel obligated to wear it," Mia babbled, making excuse after excuse for herself. Meanwhile, Rania was putting on the hat.

"Well, Princess Mia? How do I look?" she asked.

"You...look lovely! It suits you very well," replied Mia.

Rania smiled at Mia. No, she beamed, her expression carrying an innocent sense of joy. *Hmm,* thought Mia, *I suppose she's taken a liking to it after all!* Then Mia refocused herself and looked Rania straight in the eye. As their gazes locked onto each other's, Mia spoke in the most serious tone she could muster.

"I wish you all the best in your endeavors, Lady Rania. Though I can do nothing more than wish you well, know that in that sense, at least, you have my full support," said Mia.

She really did mean every word of it. After all, the abundance—or lack thereof—of Perujin's harvest was a matter of life and death for the entire empire, and Mia knew that if the empire were to die, the guillotine would be sending her to the grave right alongside it. If it were an option, Mia wouldn't have hesitated a second to travel to Perujin herself, cheer Rania along every step of the way, and even do a dance of thanks in her stead! If all she could do was cheer, then she'd put every bit of strength she had into doing so!

For a moment, Rania's mouth hung open in shock. It seemed she didn't know what to make of Mia's spirited well-wishes. Before long, however, a smile came over her face once more. "Princess Mia... thank you," said Rania. "I'll be on my way, then, but I will see you again when summer vacation comes to a close!"

Soon after, Rania boarded the ferry. As she stepped onto its deck, she turned to see Mia waving goodbye. It was only as Rania

smiled and waved back that she realized: all of a sudden, she was looking forward to returning to her homeland. Indeed, she could hardly wait to reap those first few stalks of grain. It was the same sort of excitement that comes over children who long for rain to fall so they can don the new coat they just bought.

As princess of Perujin, Rania knew full well how important the harvest was and how much weight the dance of thanks carried. But at the same time, she had been apprehensive, longing to stay in Saint-Noel and spend the summer with her friends... And yet all it took was a present from Mia to clear all those worries from her mind in an instant. Rania was beside herself with anticipation for the moment she would step out into the field with her new hat perched upon her head.

"It'd be nice if Princess Mia could come and see the ceremony herself, someday," Rania muttered to herself. Not *now*, of course. It was still far too early for that. Rania's sister, Arshia, had a very unfavorable opinion of Tearmoon, and Mia's sudden and unexpected arrival would do more to damage their nations' relations than improve them. "But someday... Someday, for sure," she told herself, her words laced with resolve. And for that sake, she would have to speak with her sister. "If only I had some sort of excuse. Hmm..."

Rania planned and pondered, never suspecting for a second the consequences her dream could have or the fact it was still but partially formed. No, her dream's full-fledged form and the golden slope it would guide her to ascend remained a mystery to her, and neither she, nor anyone else, could ever imagine where it would lead when it finally came true.

♦ Afterword ♦

Congratulations on the publication of the manga's third volume!

This is the author of the original novels, Nozomu Mochitsuki.

This volume features the first appearance of Princess Rania, who orginally debuted in a bonus story from the first volume of the novels. To be honest, I had half resigned myself to the idea that the bonus stories wouldn't be featured in the manga at all, and I'm deeply moved that not only did they make it in, they were worked in so skillfully.

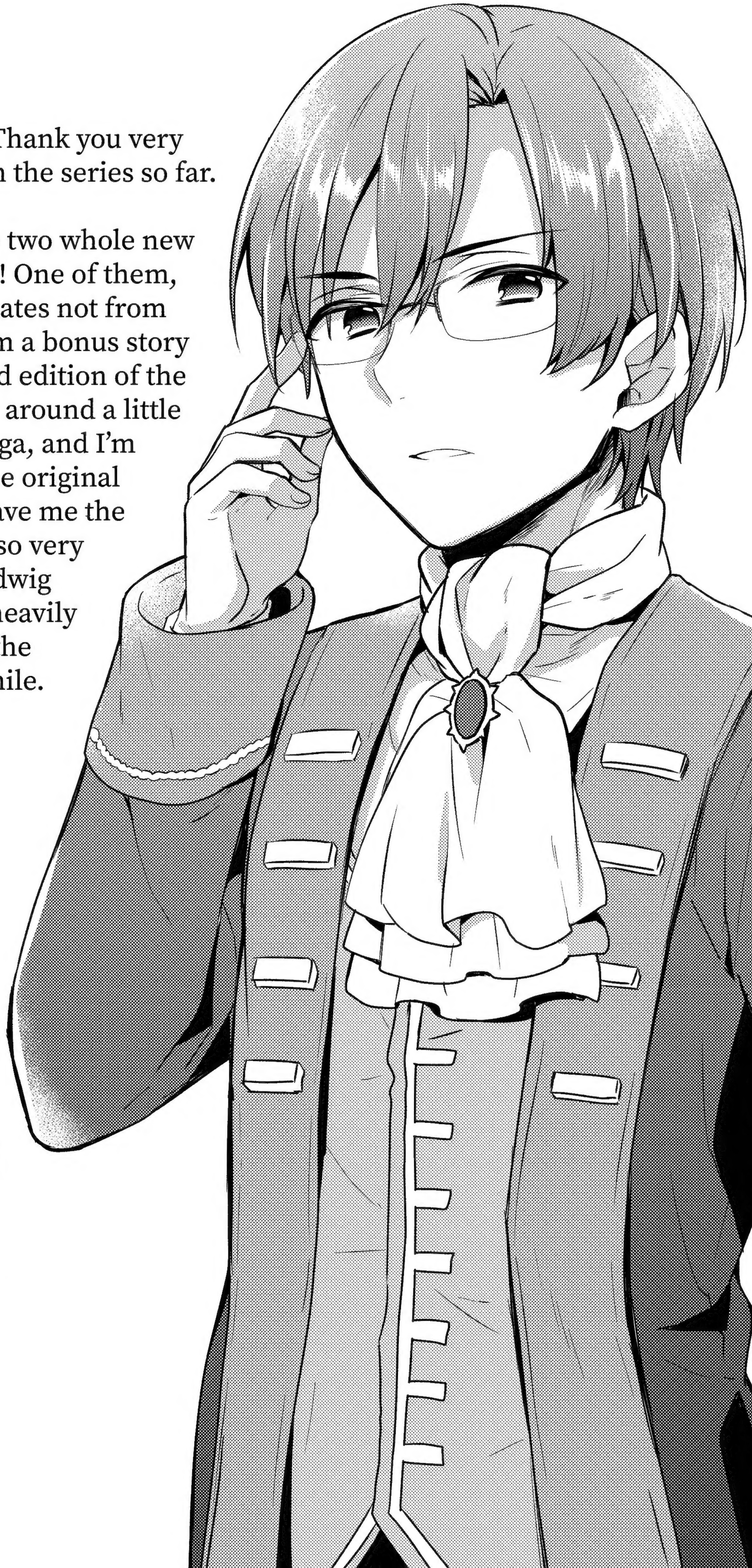
I hope that everyone who was kind enough to read this manga will enjoy Mia's fun and eventful school life!

Nozomu Mochitsuki

It's the third volume! Thank you very much for sticking with the series so far.

Mia managed to make two whole new friends in this volume! One of them, Princess Rania, originates not from the web novel but from a bonus story included in the printed edition of the series. I moved things around a little to fit her into the manga, and I'm deeply grateful that the original author, Mochitsuki, gave me the okay to do so! I was also very glad to get to draw Ludwig (and his presumably heavily smudged glasses) for the first time in quite a while.

That's all for now!
I hope I'll see you again in volume 4!



Mizu Morino

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